

# Bridge to Terabithia



## INTRODUCTION

### BRIEF BIOGRAPHY OF KATHERINE PATERSON

Katherine Paterson was born Katherine Womeldorf to Presbyterian missionary parents stationed in Qing Jiang, China. Her father was a preacher who headed a local boys' school—but during the Japanese invasion of 1937, the family was forced to return to the United States. During the war, the family moved around the American South incessantly, spending time in North Carolina, Virginia, and West Virginia—an experience that disoriented young Paterson, whose first language was Chinese. As Paterson grew older, however, she developed a love of language, reading, and writing, and graduated summa cum laude from King College, a private Presbyterian college in Tennessee, in 1954. She later traveled to Japan, and her experiences there formed the basis for her first published novel, 1973's *The Sign of the Chrysanthemum*, which is set in 12th-century Japan. In 1977, Paterson's novel *Bridge to Terabithia* was published to widespread acclaim. The book won the 1978 Newbery Medal and has since become a staple of contemporary children's literature. Paterson is also the author of *Jacob Have I Loved* and *The Great Gilly Hopkins*, the latter of which won the National Book Award. Paterson is the Vice President of the National Children's Book and Literacy Alliance and currently lives in Vermont.

### HISTORICAL CONTEXT

*Bridge to Terabithia* is set in the mid-1970s in a Virginia town which seems rural and sparsely populated in spite of being driving distance from Washington, D.C. Though Jess's family is poor and conservative—and though the town in which they live is largely the same—the influence of the social justice and civil rights movements which have spread across the country over the last decade (and which often came to a head in D.C.) can be felt throughout Jess's community. For instance, his music teacher, Miss Edmunds, is a self-described “liberated woman” who eschews social norms in the way she dresses, acts, and speaks. Leslie and her family are implied to be quite rich—or at least comfortable—people from the city; her parents are both writers, and Leslie calls them by their first names. The influx of more liberal social and familial values into Jess's town reflects the rapidly changing sociopolitical climate of mid-1970s America.

### RELATED LITERARY WORKS

*Bridge to Terabithia* has long been a celebrated cornerstone of contemporary children's literature—but upon its publication, it

was seen as controversial and banned from many schools because of its profound, mature themes concerning death, grief, religion, and the afterlife. Books that include similar reckonings with serious and often sad themes include E.B. White's classic *Charlotte's Web* and *Where the Red Fern Grows* by Wilson Rawls. The latter of which was published in 1961, over a decade before *Terabithia*, and focuses on a young Ozark boy's doomed but deep love for his twin pet hounds. *Terabithia* also may have inspired later young adult novels which seriously considered the ideas of existentialism and mortality, such as Natalie Babbitt's 1985 novel *Tuck Everlasting*. *Terabithia* also contains repeated references and allusions to C.S. Lewis's *The Chronicles of Narnia*, books which Leslie has read, loved, and used as models for her own construction of the mythical realm of Terabithia. Lewis, like Paterson, often centered religious themes and explorations of Christianity, existentialism, and the afterlife in his works for children and adults alike.

### KEY FACTS

- **Full Title:** Bridge to Terabithia
- **When Written:** Mid-1970s
- **When Published:** 1977
- **Literary Period:** Contemporary
- **Genre:** Young Adult Fiction
- **Setting:** Virginia
- **Climax:** Jess learns that his best friend Leslie has died after falling into the rushing creek which separates their neighborhood from a dense wood—and from their imaginary “kingdom,” the land of Terabithia.
- **Antagonist:** Janice Avery; Mr. Aarons
- **Point of View:** Third Person

### EXTRA CREDIT

**Based on a True Story.** While young readers have, for decades, found themselves moved and challenged by the heartbreaking story of *Bridge to Terabithia*, few may know that it is based on a real-life tragedy. When Katherine Paterson's son David was young, his best friend, Lisa Hill, died suddenly after being struck by lightning during a storm. Paterson wrote the novel as a tribute to Lisa and David—and, 30 years later, David produced and co-wrote the popular 2007 film adaptation of the book starring Josh Hutcherson and AnnaSophia Robb.



## PLOT SUMMARY

As summer comes to an end, 10-year-old Jesse Oliver Aarons,

Jr.—or Jess, as he likes to be called—spends every morning **running** through the fields behind his house in the rural town of Lark Creek, Virginia, determined to win the title of fastest runner in the fifth grade when school resumes. Running is an escape for Jess—there’s a lot for him to contend with at home. His frazzled mother, Mrs. Aarons, nags him constantly about his chores, while his distant, unaffectionate, and overworked father, Mr. Aarons, who commutes daily to a job in Washington, D.C., seems to dislike the person Jess is growing into. Jess also has four sisters—Joyce Ann, May Belle, Ellie, and Brenda—who annoy and antagonize him in various ways. When a new family moves into the shabby old farmhouse across the street, Jess’s sister May Belle hopes there will be a girl her age she can play with, but Jess soon realizes that the family’s child is a girl his own age. Her name is Leslie Burke, and she is a shabby, nosy tomboy. Jess despairs when he realizes Leslie is in his class on the first day of school—and becomes even more annoyed with her when she demands to race alongside the boys at recess (and wins). Even as Leslie’s disregard for social norms is off-putting to Jess, he finds that there is something beautiful in the way Leslie runs, free as a wild bird.

Jess finds himself hating fifth grade—the only bright spot in his week is music class with Miss Edmunds, a beautiful hippie who encourages Jess’s secret talent: drawing. Jess believes that he and Miss Edmunds are “in love.” During music class, as Leslie and Jess sing together, Jess finds himself softening toward the eccentric girl. That afternoon they sit together on the bus, and Leslie explains that her parents—wealthy writers and intellectuals whom she calls by their first names, Bill and Judy—have moved to the countryside to escape the pressures of city life in Washington, D.C. Leslie is hopeful that life in the country will be full of adventure. As the days go by, Leslie continues to draw the ridicule and ire of her classmates due to her bumbling social graces; she dresses in undershirts and cutoffs, states plainly that her family doesn’t have a television, and talks about strange hobbies like scuba diving. Jess and Leslie also have to contend with the school bully, Janice Avery, a large seventh-grade girl who terrorizes anyone in her path. As an escape from it all, Jess and Leslie sneak off to the woods one afternoon to do some exploring. Leslie says she wants to create a “whole secret country” of which she and Jess are the rulers. After swinging across the creek behind Leslie’s house on a rope swing and reaching the woods on the other side, Leslie and Jess name the place they’ve found Terabithia. Over the next several weeks, they build a castle out of scrap metal and furnish the place with provisions. Jess and Leslie spend all their time at school together—and every afternoon playing in Terabithia and the “sacred” pine groves beyond.

As the months go by, Terabithia becomes more and more of a refuge from the pressures of school and daily life. Jess and Leslie retreat to Terabithia when they need to strategize—such as when they must come up with a plan to get Janice Avery

back for tormenting May Belle—and when they need to escape the cloying constraints of their families. For Christmas, Jess and Leslie have a small celebration of their own in Terabithia—Leslie gives Jess a set of paints, and Jess gives Leslie a puppy, whom they name **Prince Terrien and appoint the “guardian” of Terabithia**. As Jess finds himself less and less happy at home, where something is always being demanded of him (even as his sisters receive preferential treatment from their parents), he begins spending more time at the Burkes’, where Leslie and Bill are fixing up the house and painting the living room gold. Jess learns to feel more at ease around the smart, artistic Burkes, and is proud that he’s able to make himself useful and work hard. One afternoon, after the golden living room is complete, Leslie and Jess return to Terabithia for the first time in weeks. Later, as Jess falls asleep in his bed, his sister May Belle whispers to him that she’s followed him and Leslie to their secret hideout—she knows where they’ve been spending their afternoons. Jess warns May Belle not to tell anyone about Terabithia.

As Easter approaches, nonstop rain falls over Lark Creek. Mr. Aarons is laid off from his job, creating even more tension and desperation in Jess’s family. Jess asks his mother if Leslie can come to church with them for Easter—she’s curious about church, never having been—and Mrs. Aarons agrees to bring her along. Leslie is fascinated by the service but admits afterward that she doesn’t believe anything that was said. May Belle warns Leslie that if she doesn’t believe the Bible, she’ll be damned to hell when she dies. Leslie and Jess laugh off young May Belle’s worries. The rain continues, and each time Jess and Leslie go to Terabithia, they find that the water in the normally dry creek bed is rising higher and higher. One afternoon, it is so high and rushing so swiftly that Jess is afraid to cross it. He begins dreading visits to Terabithia—a fact he feels deeply guilty about, and which makes him worry that he’s unfit to be its king. Leslie has no qualms about crossing over to Terabithia in the rain, so Jess is afraid to tell her about his own nervousness.

One stormy morning during Easter break, the phone rings at the Aaronses’ house—Miss Edmunds is on the other end. She asks Jess if he would like to come with her to D.C. for the day to visit an art museum. Jess excitedly accepts her invitation—but does not invite Leslie along, craving some alone time with the beautiful Miss Edmunds. The day is a magical one, and Jess, who has never been to an art museum before, takes in all the magnificent paintings with a somber joy. Jess returns home happier than he’s been in a long time, excited to tell Leslie all about his adventure. When he walks in the door of his house, though, he finds his family sitting in silence around the kitchen table. They inform him that Leslie is dead—she fell, hit her head, and drowned while swinging across the creek and into Terabithia. The devastated Jess leaves the house, running down the town’s back roads until his muscles scream. Mr. Aarons drives after Jess in his pickup truck, and, eventually, Jesse lets

his father catch up with him, scoop him up in his arms, and bring him home.

Jess sleeps for hours—when he wakes, he believes that hearing about Leslie’s death was simply a bad dream. He goes back to sleep looking forward to playing with Leslie the next day. In the morning, however, Jess’s father reminds him solemnly that Leslie’s death is real and that Jess needs to find a way to cope with the loss. Jess accompanies his parents across the street to the Burkes’ house to pay their respects to Bill and Judy. Jess is off-put by how emotional and expressive Leslie’s adult family members are and experiences anger, fright, and denial as he watches them cry over his best friend, whom he believes “belonged to him.” Jess flees the gathering, runs home, and collects the paints Leslie gave him for Christmas. He runs to the creek and throws the paints in. Again, Jess soon realizes that his father has followed him. He allows his father to hold him as he shakes and cries. The next morning, Jess wakes up early to do his chores, which he’s fallen behind on since Leslie’s death. He goes out to the creek to try to retrieve some of his paints, but finds they’ve all washed away. Noticing that a large log has washed up on the bank, he uses it to construct a makeshift bridge over the creek, whose waters are calm but still high. In Terabithia, Jess constructs a funeral wreath for Leslie, his “queen”—but soon hears May Belle’s anguished cries somewhere nearby. Jess runs to the creek to find that May Belle is stuck on the log, terrified of moving forward or going backward. Jess coaches her back to the other side.

Jess continues to mourn Leslie. Returning to school is difficult—all of his classmates whisper about him and refuse to meet his eye, knowing he’s been touched by tragedy. Jess’s imposing homeroom teacher Mrs. Myers, whom he and Leslie used to make fun of ruthlessly behind her back, pulls Jess aside to tell him it’s okay to grieve, and to admit that she is still mourning the loss of her husband. Jess feels guilty about making fun of Mrs. Myers, and, as thoughts of Leslie and her goodness eat at him throughout the day, resolves to destroy Terabithia. He believes that without Leslie, he can’t make its magic happen. While helping the Burkes load their possessions into a U-Haul—they are preparing to leave Lark Creek, having moved here for Leslie’s sake—Jess gets an idea. He asks if he can use some of the lumber from the woodpile behind their house, and they tell him he’s welcome to it before offering Jess a teary goodbye. Bill admits that though he’d wanted to leave Prince Terrien with Jess, he can’t—he wants to keep the dog himself as a reminder of his daughter. The next day, Jess begins hauling pieces of lumber to the creek to build a real, functioning **bridge to Terabithia**. As Jess is finishing the bridge, May Belle appears at the creek and asks him what he’s doing. Jess places flowers in May Belle’s hair and instructs her to walk across it—as she does, Jess points out all the Terabithians who have gathered to mark the arrival of “the queen they’ve been waiting for.”



## CHARACTERS

### MAJOR CHARACTERS

**Jess Aarons** – Jesse Oliver Aarons, Jr.—or Jess, as he prefers to be called—is the 10-year-old protagonist of *Bridge to Terabithia*. Athletic and artistic, sensitive yet determined to be tough and competitive, Jess is a skilled painter and **runner** who is constantly trying to prove his masculinity to his judgmental father and teasing sisters (May Belle, Brenda, Ellie, and Joyce Ann). Jess is burdened by the pressures of being the only boy in his family in other ways, too—many household chores fall to him, and he feels stifled, annoyed, and lonely much of the time. Jess’s mother and father struggle to make ends meet each day, and Jess and his sisters are frequently resentful of the ways in which their family’s world seems to revolve around money and its lack. All of that changes when Leslie Burke moves onto Jess’s street. A tomboyish girl who beats Jess in an important race at school, Leslie is, at first, yet another threat to Jess’s masculinity and a reminder of how he has to minimize himself to fit in with his family. As the school year progresses, however, Jess learns just how special Leslie is. Together, the two of them find a stretch of abandoned woods on the opposite side of a creek near their houses and dub it Terabithia—a magical land where the two of them are in charge, and find that anything they dream might come true. Jess soon comes to love Leslie and regard her as his best friend. As Jess and Leslie navigate school and family together, Jess feels more supported and loved than he has in his life. When Leslie dies suddenly in a tragic accident—on her way over the creek to Terabithia, no less—Jess cannot accept the fact that his best friend is dead, and tries to deny the fact of her loss and literally run away from the news. Eventually, Jess realizes he can’t outrun the truth—he can’t ignore Leslie’s death any more than he can ignore the impact she’s had on his life, his confidence, and his capacity for wonder. Jess builds a **bridge to Terabithia** to symbolize his desire to accept Leslie’s death, carry on her memory, and let others into the world of Terabithia—a place where anything is possible, where everyone is equal, and where friendship, love, adventure, and nonconformity reign.

**Leslie Burke** – At the start of the novel, the spunky and tomboyish Leslie Burke is new to the town of Lark Creek, Virginia. She and her parents Bill and Judy (whom she calls by their first names) are successful writers who have decided to leave behind their comfortable, upper-middle-class lifestyle in Washington D.C. to spend some time in the country “reassessing their value structure.” Leslie is smart, precocious, athletic, and, most strikingly of all, doesn’t care what anyone thinks of her. At first, Jess sees Leslie as a threat—she beats him in a **race** he’s been training for all summer—but soon, he warms to her outgoing, carefree personality, and the two become fast friends. As an easy intimacy develops between them, they seek to build a place where they can be alone and hidden away from

the rest of the world. After using a rope swing to cross a low creek on the edge of the woods near their homes, Leslie dubs the land on the other side the land of Terabithia and appoints herself and Jess its queen and king. Using the fantasy tropes she's learned about from *The Chronicles of Narnia* and other books, she imagines great battles against invaders and adversaries and instructs Jess in the building of a castle; she appoints a pine grove just beyond their hideaway the land's sacred grounds. Leslie's fire, imagination, and warmth draw Jess in, and soon, he is spending all of his time either playing with Leslie in Terabithia or spending time getting to know Leslie's artistic, intellectual parents. Tragedy strikes when Leslie visits Terabithia on her own one day in the middle of a storm—when the rope swing breaks, Leslie falls, hits her head, and drowns in the creek below. The unimaginable horror of such a loss rips its way through the small Lark Creek community, disorienting and traumatizing Jess. In the wake of losing Leslie, Jess learns to exhibit the same grace, compassion, and curiosity Leslie embodied in life. He builds a **bridge to Terabithia** in her honor, hoping that the atmosphere of love, adventure, and nonjudgment they created together will not disappear with Leslie.

**May Belle Aarons** – Jess's younger sister. A six-year-old who's unusually precocious and perceptive for her age, May Belle is Jess's favorite sibling. She looks up to him and admires his resilience as a **runner**. May Belle often does Jess favors around the house, helping him with his chores when his older sisters, Brenda and Ellie, would never even stop to consider such a request. May Belle is sweet, naïve, generous, and curious. She constantly longs to tag along and play with Jess and Leslie—but because the two of them usually want to be alone in Terabithia, they come up with ways of distracting and placating May Belle. At the same time, they are fiercely defensive of May Belle—when she's bullied at school by Janice Avery, they scheme to come up with a way to get Janice back on May Belle's behalf. At the end of the novel, after Leslie's death, Jess builds a **bridge to Terabithia** to prevent an accident like Leslie's from hurting anyone ever again—and welcomes May Belle to Terabithia as its new queen, demonstrating his desire to continue building his relationship with May Belle even in the face of his grief.

**Miss Edmunds** – The music teacher at Lark Creek Elementary. Jess is “in love” with the beautiful, smart, talented, and empathetic Miss Edmunds, a self-described “liberated woman” who wears blue jeans and keeps her hair long and wild. Miss Edmunds is the only person—other than Leslie—to compliment Jess's artistic talent and support him in his drawing, often encouraging him to bring her each new piece of art he makes. She even takes Jess to Washington, D.C. one afternoon to visit the National Gallery—it is Jess's first trip to an art museum, and he decides to keep the experience to himself rather than invite Leslie along. The trip ends up being a fateful one, as Leslie, left

behind in Lark Creek for the day, visits Terabithia alone—and falls to her death on the way over the creek. Miss Edmunds is kind, generous, and emotional, and helps nurture the parts of Jess that even his own family tries to ignore or suppress.

**Janice Avery** – A seventh grader at the Lark Creek middle school and a notorious bully. Janice Avery's imposing stature, petty cruelty, and the help she gets from her sidekicks Wilma and Bobby Sue all make her a frightening presence to the elementary school students. As the novel progresses, Janice's tyranny increases and she targets Jess's sister May Belle, so Jess and Leslie successfully hatch a plan to prank Janice—but soon realize that Janice is dealing with personal family problems that perhaps fuel her anger, meanness, and desire for control over others. Janice eventually becomes a much more sympathetic figure, and Leslie even begins refers to her as a kind of half-friend.

**Mrs. Myers** – The strict, unsmiling fifth-grade teacher at Lark Creek Elementary. Jess and Leslie often make fun of “Monster Mouth Myers” for being an unattractive and humorless stickler, using cruel language to mock her appearance and demeanor. At the end of the novel, however, in the days following Leslie's death, Mrs. Myers pulls Jess aside and tells him that she understands the grief he's feeling—her husband died, she says, several years ago. Jess feels terrible for the cruel way he's treated Mrs. Myers all year, and agrees that the two should “help each other” finish the term and work through their grief.

**Bill Burke** – Leslie's father and Judy's husband. A political writer whose job often takes him to Washington, D.C., Bill and his wife are open-minded and progressive. At the start of the novel, sick of city life and the pull of fame, they move to the rural town of Lark Creek to “reassess their value structure,” bringing Leslie along with them. Bill is patient, artistic, and open in his ideas and emotions—the polar opposite of Jess's own father. Bill and Judy are devastated in the wake of their daughter's death and waste little time packing up their house in preparation to return to the city.

**Judy Burke** – Leslie's mother and Bill's wife. A young, beautiful, and idealistic novelist, Judy is warm, accepting, and empathetic. Judy often reads poetry aloud to Jess and Leslie, filling Jess with a feeling of beauty and belonging. Jess comes to envy Leslie for having such an intellectually curious and laid-back mother, as he resents his own for being strict, controlling, and stifling.

**Mr. Aarons** – Jess, May Belle, Brenda, Ellie, and Joyce Ann's father. A hardworking man who drives into Washington, D.C. to work each day, since there are no jobs to be had in the Aarons' small, rural town in Virginia. Jess's father is often irritable and cagey, and he is especially hard on Jess, whom he worries is not growing up to be masculine enough. Jess's father discourages Jess from pursuing his love of art and teases him for spending all his free time with a girl—but as the novel unfolds and tragedy unspools, Mr. Aarons begins to soften, and eventually

comes to Jess's aid after Leslie's death. Mr. Aarons's tough exterior masks a more emotional inner life—one that has, it seems, been beaten down by the difficult demands of scrounging up menial work for little pay. Just like his wife, Mr. Aarons wishes he could provide better for his family.

**Mrs. Aarons** – Jess, May Belle, Brenda, Ellie, and Joyce Ann's mother. Often frazzled, worried, and overworked, Mrs. Aarons struggles to balance housekeeping and her motherly duties. Jess often feels that his mother likes his sisters better than him, treating him harshly and unfairly—but as the novel unfolds, it becomes clear that Mrs. Aarons is simply doing her best to play the hand she's been dealt in life and wrestling with the crushing pressure and sadness of not being able to give her children everything they want and need.

**Brenda Aarons** – Jess's eldest sister. Brenda thinks Jess is a nuisance and is constantly teasing him, laughing at him, and trying to get him in trouble with their mother. She is preoccupied with looks and fashion, and often finds herself getting frustrated and upset with their family's lack of money. Jess finds Brenda “dumb” and self-centered and hates the way that she and Ellie conspire to gang up on him. Brenda isn't really redeemed at any point in the novel—she continues to berate and criticize Jess even after the death of Leslie, policing the way he reacts to her loss, and only behaves gently toward him in a single moment when forced to by her family.

**Ellie Aarons** – Jess's older sister. Like Brenda, Ellie is preoccupied with looks and appearances—but she is a bit more prim and graceful than Brenda, and often acts like a know-it-all. Ellie delights in making fun of Jess, and, like Brenda, doesn't spare a single thought about his feelings even after Leslie dies.

## MINOR CHARACTERS

**Joyce Ann Aarons** – Jess's youngest sister. A little girl of just four years old, Joyce Ann is quiet and overly sensitive, often crying at even the slightest bit of teasing from her older siblings.

**Willard Hughes** – A boy at school on whom all the girls have crushes. Jess and Leslie decide to use their knowledge of Janice Avery's infatuation with Willard to play a cruel prank on her as retribution for stealing May Belle's Twinkies.

**Gary Fulcher** – A competitive and athletic fifth grader who becomes insecure and defensive when he realizes that Leslie Burke is a better **runner** than all of the boys.

**Wayne Pettis** – The former fastest **runner** in the fifth grade, whose legacy Jess is determined to live up to.

**Wanda Kay Moore** – A “snotty” girl at school who loves being a teacher's pet.

**Wilma Dean** – One of Janice Avery's friends and a school bully.

**Bobby Sue Henshaw** – One of Janice Avery's friends and a school bully.



## THEMES

In LitCharts literature guides, each theme gets its own color-coded icon. These icons make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. If you don't have a color printer, you can still use the icons to track themes in black and white.



### FRIENDSHIP, GRIEF, AND LOSS

The friendship at the heart of *Bridge to Terabithia* abruptly becomes a source of grief and loss near the end of the novel. As the story unfolds, however,

Katherine Paterson charts the ways in which the power of friendship can become a kind of roadmap to navigating grief. Ultimately, Paterson argues that the lessons of intimacy and respect learned within the bounds of friendship—and the gift of seeing oneself through another's eyes, which any good friendship offers—are the only salve against sorrow and mourning.

Katherine Paterson structures *Bridge to Terabithia* by building up the central friendship between Jess Aarons and Leslie Burke, two children living in rural Virginia, to demonstrate the ways in which friendship provides one with stability, comfort, refuge, and even identity. When Jess and Leslie meet, Jess is dissatisfied with his relationships to several members of his family, and his friendships at school feel strained and performative. At the start of the novel, Jess doesn't seem to have ever known real friendship and his relationships with his sisters are contentious at best. Though Jess and his impressionable younger sister, May Belle, adore each other, Jess doesn't have any real, profound connection with his other sisters. For the most part, they treat him badly, and he resents them as a result. At school, things are not much better. Jess has a few friends, including the hyper-competitive Gary Fulcher, but generally these friendships are shallow and rooted in taunting, teasing, and besting one another. When Leslie moves to town, she and Jess become fast friends after a brief, fleeting period of competitiveness. Their friendship is genuine, unpretentious, and based on mutual trust, respect, and indeed love. Being friends with Leslie changes Jess and opens him up not just to hidden parts of himself, but to the greater hidden magic of the world around him. Jess and Leslie, teased at school for being so close, decide to create a secret world of their own. Beyond the creek behind Leslie's house, they settle down on a patch of forest and name the land Terabithia. Terabithia becomes Jess and Leslie's escape from the world, and a symbol of their freewheeling friendship. At the height of their happiness, Jess thinks to himself, “Leslie was more than his friend. She was his other, more exciting self—his way to Terabithia and all the worlds beyond.” As Jess and Leslie's friendship grows and deepens, it becomes, for Jess, a gateway to “worlds beyond” his own. Jess's strong feelings for Leslie

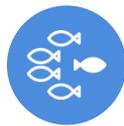
show that true friendship is not just a distraction or a passing fancy—it is a key to other realms, both imaginary and in oneself. This profound moment also foreshadows the ways in which Leslie's friendship will continue to guide Jess through the realm of grief, which he is soon to enter.

After Leslie falls to her death while crossing the creek that divides Terabithia from her backyard one stormy morning, Paterson's novel switches gears to show how the lessons learned within a particularly important friendship can cushion the loss of that friendship, and even enable a person to better cope with grief. When Jess learns of Leslie's death, he is, at first, in total denial. He doesn't believe his family when they tell him Leslie is dead, insisting that the entire thing is simply a bad dream. Before long, however, Jess's family helps him to realize that he must confront the fact of Leslie's death—and his complicated, almost indescribable feelings of grief, loss, and rage. When Jess first learns of Leslie's death, he is so traumatized and filled with guilt for not going with her to Terabithia on the morning of her demise that he enters a state of denial which persists for over a day. He doesn't feel ready to confront the loss of Leslie—he is greedy for more time with her and unwilling to imagine a world in which they are not together. Jess even believes that Leslie has “failed” or “tricked him” by making him “leave his old self behind and come into her world,” only to leave him abruptly by dying. Jess doesn't yet see how entering Leslie's “world” has in fact prepared him to process and mourn her death in a healthy way.

After visiting the Burkes' house and witnessing the outpouring of grief among Leslie's distraught family members, Jess realizes that his friendship with Leslie—brief though it was—has provided him with a roadmap through his grief. The lessons Leslie taught Jess, he understands, will help him not just through his present state of mourning but through the larger confusions and disappointments that life will surely bring. Jess chooses to commemorate Leslie's death by visiting Terabithia, building a funeral wreath, and laying it down in the sacred pine groves where he and Leslie once sought counsel from Terabithia's “spirits.” Jess also welcomes his sister May Belle to Terabithia as its new “queen.” Previously, he barred May Belle from entering Terabithia and warned her that she'd be in trouble if she ever told its secrets to anyone. By the end of the novel, not only does Jess welcome May Belle to his and Leslie's secret world—he suggests that one day, his other sisters might join him, as well. Jess's actions demonstrate that Leslie's warmth, imagination, and true friendship have shown Jess how to grieve: not by isolating oneself, entering a state of denial, or forgetting the past, but by using the things learned within the bounds of such a special friendship to forge a way forward.

The painful climax of the *Bridge to Terabithia*, unforeseen and unexpected for the characters within the book and readers of it alike, cuts short Jess and Leslie's beautiful and vibrant friendship. However, the book's falling action illuminates

Paterson's central argument: that the truest friendships provide all participants with the grace, understanding, and sense of unconditional love to make their way through times of grief and sorrow.



## INDIVIDUALITY VS. CONFORMITY

When Leslie Burke moves to the small town of Lark Creek, Virginia, the self-assured tomboy from the city is decidedly out of place. Jess Aarons is drawn to Leslie but finds himself continually embarrassed by Leslie's shirking of social norms and devil-may-care attitude when it comes to interacting with their peers—Jess himself has spent his whole life hiding the truth of who he is and what he values from those around him, both at home and at school. As the novel progresses, Jess comes to learn many important lessons about the value of nonconformity and the freedom that comes with asserting one's uniqueness. Ultimately, Katherine Paterson uses *Bridge to Terabithia* to suggest that a life lived under the anvil of conformity is no life at all.

From the very start of the novel, Paterson uses the characters of Jess and Leslie to demonstrate the ways in which the pressure to conform weighs upon those who are destined to stand out—especially when those individuals are children, for whom the socially-mandated suppression of one's true personality is especially cruel. At the start of the novel, Jess Aarons lives a life controlled almost completely by other's expectations for him—a pressure that leads him to suppress the parts of him that are different. Jess wants to stand out, but in a way that's socially acceptable, so he chooses to pursue success as a **runner** rather than as an artist (his true calling). He's had his passion for drawing scrutinized and steamrolled by his father, Mr. Aarons, and his friends at school, including the brash and competitive Gary Fulcher. Jess draws only in private, though he runs in public—a reflection of his insecurity about the nonconformist aspects of his personality and his desire to only present the conventional, socially-acceptable parts of himself to the world.

Jess, however, seeks refuge in those who encourage his nonconformist tendencies. He has a huge crush on his music teacher Miss Edmunds, the only person who has ever encouraged him to continue drawing or praised his artwork. Miss Edmunds is herself a nonconformist—a self-professed “liberated woman” who dresses like a hippie and disregards others' opinions of her appearance and actions. When Leslie Burke comes to town, Jess is at first embarrassed or even repulsed by her unwillingness to conform to what's expected of girls her age—but as their friendship deepens, he comes to respect and even emulate her nonconformist tendencies. Jess plays with Leslie more and more at school rather than his male friends, seemingly oblivious to the taunts they get about being boyfriend and girlfriend. He also helps Leslie establish the imaginary realm of Terabithia in a patch of woods near their

houses—a place where they can be rulers rather than followers, setters of precedent and creators of the status quo rather than blind sheep following along with the rules and regulations of the “real” world.

Leslie Burke is, from her very first appearance in the novel, an individual who defies being defined or wrangled. When Jess first meets her, he isn't even sure whether she's a boy or a girl—that's how intensely she resists being boxed in or categorized according to other people's expectations or the social status quo. At school, she doesn't play with the girls but instead runs races alongside the boys. Even her family is unusual in the town of Lark Creek—her parents, Bill and Judy, are writers and intellectuals who move to the rural community to escape the societal pressures of Washington, D.C. Though everyone in the neighborhood—including Jess's parents, Mr. and Mrs. Aarons—see them as “hippies,” the Burkes happily carve out a life for themselves, uncaring about what others seem to think of them. Leslie's imagination is another aspect of her personality in which her nonconformity shines through. Leslie creates Terabithia as a way for her and Jess to escape their schoolmates' expectations of them, and, within the world of Terabithia, she lets her mind run free. Jess and Leslie are the king and queen of Terabithia, and, as such, they're the ones who make the rules. Terabithia allows Leslie to dictate the world she lives in rather than having her behavior, gender expression, and friendships constantly policed and monitored.

Though the novel never directly explores Leslie's point of view, the very existence of Terabithia suggests that Leslie, like Jess, struggles with feelings of being an outcast or a misfit—going against her own advice, she seems to long for a way to keep parts of herself secret. Leslie's nonconformist tendencies broaden Jess's horizons and open up his world—but Jess also helps Leslie by giving her, in the form of his love and friendship, a safe, nonjudgmental space to be radically herself. By the end of the novel, Jess is no longer shy about his passion for drawing, his love for Leslie, or his reverence for Terabithia—the things about himself he once kept hidden away are now on full display. For instance, he brings his sister May Belle to Terabithia and accepts a gift of paints and paper from the Burkes in front of his father. Jess even allows his classmates and his teacher Mrs. Myers to witness his grief over Leslie—whom he once avoided even being seen with—when she tragically dies in an accident. This shows that Leslie's effect on Jess has been to show him the truth of who he is—and, through her true friendship and unconditional love, encourage him to accept himself.

Ultimately, Paterson shows how both Jess and Leslie's lives are improved by accepting the truth of who they are rather than laboring day in and day out to present to the world a constructed front of a person they are not. Even though Leslie tragically dies, she leaves behind an indelible mark on Jess's life, having been the first person to show him just how beautiful and full life can be when one lives it for oneself rather than for

others.



## FANTASY AND ESCAPISM

The fantastical realm of Terabithia, which Jess and Leslie create and build together and then “rule” over as self-appointed king and queen, provides a necessary escape for both children. Terabithia is a place where Jess and Leslie are free to use their active imaginations away from the prying eyes of their classmates, where they can test the limits of their bravery, and where they can be the purest versions of themselves rather than feel pressured to maintain the pretenses they affect elsewhere. Throughout the novel, Paterson suggests that every child needs a Terabithia of their own—a place where they feel free, unfettered, and fully themselves.

“There in the shadowy light of the stronghold everything seemed possible. Between the two of them they owned the world and no enemy, [not even] Jess's own fears and insufficiencies, [...] could ever really defeat them.” This is how Katherine Paterson describes the way that Terabithia, the imaginary magical kingdom which Jess and Leslie create as a hideout from the rest of the world, makes the two of them feel. Terabithia is a place where Leslie and Jess feel fully liberated and invincible. Every child, Paterson suggests, deserves to feel the safety and freedom that a place—or even a state of mind—like Terabithia creates.

Jess and Leslie decide to create Terabithia as a secret world for themselves after finding it difficult to interact and play the way they want to at school. Their classmates don't understand their friendship, and, in Jess's case, his family doesn't understand the more fanciful, imaginative parts of his personality. Leslie has read *The Chronicles of Narnia* books and longs for adventure and freedom in the countryside after years of life in the big city. Thus, she envisions Terabithia as a place where she and Jess have absolute power—but where they remain just, fair rulers and the kindest, best versions of themselves. Terabithia remains a secret that only Jess and Leslie know about—they don't tell their families about their private realm, and though Jess's younger sister May Belle follows them down to the creek which separates Terabithia from the “real” world one day, she doesn't know the name of the hideout, its purpose, or its mythology. The secrecy surrounding Terabithia demonstrates that while it privately serves as a place of empowerment and happiness for Jess and Leslie, they still don't feel fully comfortable being the people they are in Terabithia out in the real world. This underscores the importance of a place like Terabithia not just for Leslie and Jess specifically, but for all children more largely.

Terabithia allows Jess and Leslie to play with power dynamics, experiment with feelings of fear, and simulate the acts of violence they wish they could enact upon those who are cruel to them in the “real” world. Jess and Leslie fight “giants” who

resemble their real-life bully, Janice Avery, supplicate themselves before the “spirits” in Terabithia’s “sacred” pine grove, and give themselves a small thrill of fear each time they use the rope swing to cross the creek into Terabithia’s bounds. In doing these things, they are able to explore and better understand their feelings of fear, anger, and submission. Paterson uses the darker aspects of Terabithia to demonstrate how children need places not just to feel safe, but to experiment with different aspects of themselves. This is a different kind of escapism—not escape from the real world’s problems, necessarily, but escape from the judgement of how they might seek to deal with those problems (and with the messier, darker feelings that accompany adolescence).

Near the end of the novel, Leslie tragically falls to her death when the rope swing she and Jess use to get to the other side of the creek (where Terabithia is) breaks. As a result, Jess chooses to build the titular **bridge to Terabithia** to replace the dangerous rope swing. He invites May Belle to cross the bridge and enter the kingdom as its new and long-awaited queen; he even implies that one day, they can bring Joyce Ann, their younger sister, into the fold of Terabithia. On a symbolic level, Jess’s ability to welcome someone new to Terabithia represents his ability to conquer his grief. On another, more practical level, Jess bringing May Belle across the creek shows that he realizes just how much better Terabithia has made his life, and now he wants to share it with May Belle, another child in need of attention, fantasy, and a place for freedom of self-expression.

Terabithia provides Leslie and Jess with a refuge from the storm of childhood and adolescence. In Terabithia, they are able to feel powerful, loved, and in control of their own destinies. Paterson demonstrates the need of every child to feel this way—and suggests that, particularly for children who are mistreated at home or unpopular at school, there are undeniable benefits to using fantasy and escapism to cope with the struggles of growing up.



## GENDER ROLES

The easy, intimate friendship between Jess Aarons and Leslie Burke puzzles those around them, both at school and at home. The tomboyish Leslie’s disregard for social norms and traditional expressions of femininity, as well as the sensitive Jess’s artistic talent and disregard for cultivating friendships with the other boys in his grade, make both children into objects of curiosity and even scorn in their communities. As the novel progresses, Paterson explores how Jess and Leslie’s unlikely friendship is intimately entwined with their mutual refusal to embody the gender roles dictated for them by society. Ultimately, Paterson suggests that pressuring children to strictly adhere to the status quo when it comes to the embodiment of gender roles is at best unnecessary, and at worst actively harmful.

Jess and Leslie are, from the start of the novel, two children who don’t necessarily fit in with the status quos prescribed for either of their genders. The tomboyish Leslie and the sensitive Jess draw confusion from their family, taunts from their peers, and even experience confusion and self-loathing resulting from their society’s strict, unnuanced view of the roles that boys and girls must inhabit and perform. At the start of the novel, Jess is determined to become the fastest **runner** in the fifth grade. He loves the freeing feeling he gets from running wild through the fields beyond his house—but running is only one of his passions. Jess’s best-loved hobby is drawing, but because of his tough, masculine father Mr. Aarons’s insistence that art is an unsuitably feminine pursuit for a boy, Jess has flung himself into running, which is the favorite hobby of his fellow male classmates at Lark Creek Elementary.

Jess also has four sisters, and though he feels sick of being surrounded by so many women, he soon finds that his closest friend at school is also a girl—Leslie Burke. When Jess develops a close friendship with Leslie, he finds himself in defiance of yet another gender norm, since many in his community believe that boys can only form platonic friendships with other boys. Other people—schoolmates and family members alike—don’t understand Jess’s relationship with Leslie. His classmate Gary Fulcher and his older sisters Brenda and Ellie all tease Jess about his “girlfriend,” unable to conceive of a platonic and equitable friendship between two 10-year-olds of different genders. Mrs. Aarons is skeptical and judgmental of Leslie’s tomboyish nature and believes that she is a negative influence on Jess. The other characters in the novel don’t understand Jess and Leslie’s friendship because it defies gender norms. Leslie and Jess both cast aside prescribed behaviors for boys and girls within the confines of their friendship, encouraging each other to be who they are without any fear or shame.

Leslie Burke, the novel’s secondary protagonist, is another individual who shirks not only society’s expectations in terms of her behavior, but also in terms of her gender role. From the moment Jess meets Leslie, he is uncertain of her gender and has trouble pinning her down in one category or another: “The person slid off the fence and came toward [Jess]. [...] ‘My name’s Leslie Burke.’ She even had one of those dumb names that could go either way, but he was sure now that he was right.” Leslie dresses like a boy and sometimes even acts like one. She doesn’t enjoy playing with the other girls at recess and takes up running races against the boys. She wears undershirts and cutoffs—never dresses or skirts—and the only time she gets dressed up in the novel is for a visit to church with the Aaronses. Leslie is intrepid, adventurous, and unafraid—all qualities generally associated with boys her age, not girls. Leslie discovers and founds the kingdom of Terabithia and appoints herself its queen—but the very act of laying claim to a kingdom is a radical act which goes against the timid and submissive roles women were expected to play in society even in the

mid-1970s (when the novel takes place), years after the sexual revolution and women's liberation movement in the U.S. Leslie's parents Bill and Judy encourage her to be exactly who she is—but she witnesses Jess's parents' attempts to stifle him, and finds herself acting small, polite, and quiet in the Aaronses' presence. She struggles to fit in at school, and even cries in the bathroom one afternoon when the other girls are mean to her. Paterson uses all these examples of Leslie publicly resisting stereotypical gender roles—and privately contending with the constant and very real pressure to conform—to show how cruel it is to suppress a child's self-expression.

Throughout the novel, Paterson investigates how strict gender roles can alienate and inhibit individuals—children, especially—who deviate from the norms dictated by society. Jess and Leslie, luckily, have one another to complement and validate the other—but Paterson suggests that many children are not so fortunate as to have a friend who accepts them regardless of whether or not they follow society's rules.



### APPEARANCES VS. REALITY

As the novel progresses, Katherine Paterson demonstrates the frequent disconnect between constructed appearances and private human

struggle, as many of her characters quietly deal with problems, feelings, and fears they feel unable to express. By having Jess and Leslie encounter several secondary characters who are much deeper and more complicated than they first seem to be, Paterson suggests that one should always be kind to others, since it is impossible to know the realities of a person's inner demons or burdens from the appearance or behavior they present to the world.

*Bridge to Terabithia* is saturated with instances in which things are revealed to be other than what they seem—and most often, these things involve an individual presenting one front to the world while struggling behind closed doors with a reality that sometimes tragically contradicts the appearance they've worked so hard to construct. Janice Avery, a terrible seventh-grade bully, is a large and imposing girl who terrorizes anyone who gets in her way. She frequently stands outside the girls' bathroom, demanding lunch money from younger students in exchange for entry. Along with her sidekicks Wilma and Bobby Sue, she intimidates and controls the other students through cruelty, theft, and physical threats. Janice presents a front of malice and aggression—which is soon revealed to be masking something much deeper. About halfway through the novel, Leslie and Jess have found a way to get back at Janice for her cruelty to May Belle by writing Janice a fake love note from Willard Hughes, a popular boy in the seventh grade. However, Leslie discovers that perhaps their retaliatory move on Janice was unnecessarily cruel. After finding Janice crying in the bathroom one afternoon, Leslie learns that Janice is alone in the world. Her father beats her violently, and when she

confided in her friends about this secret, they blabbed it to the whole school—spreading a rumor that now threatens Janice's tough exterior. This is just one example of the ways in which Paterson suggests that even the most unlikely of people are often dealing with serious, unimaginable private problems, and often they create a constructed persona to mask the truths of their lives.

The second major run-in with a character whose appearance belies their reality is Mrs. Myers, the overweight, strict and unpopular fifth-grade teacher. Mrs. Myers is a tough, unsmiling, and unpleasant woman whose students dislike her intensely. Everyone makes fun of her behind her back—but Jess and Leslie are especially cruel, coming up with nicknames that are dehumanizing (such as “Monster Mouth Myers” and “Mrs. Double-Chinned Myers”). Mrs. Myers is notorious for smiling only once a year—on the first day of school—in order to keep her students from getting too comfortable with her. Jess and Leslie both fear and dislike Mrs. Myers, but their hatred of her is founded entirely on the appearance she has constructed—and their classmates' opinions about it. Toward the end of the novel, on the first day Jess returns to school following Leslie's sudden accidental death, he is too sad to even stand for the pledge of allegiance. Mrs. Myers calls him out to the hall, where Jess believes she is going to yell at him—instead, with tears in her eyes, she tells him that she understands his grief, as her husband died several years ago. She urges Jess not to let anyone tell him that it's time to move on or forget Leslie, but rather to keep her alive in his heart. She offers him the chance to work together over the rest of the school year to help each other cope—she, too, has been deeply affected by Leslie's death. Jess immediately feels terrible guilt—he had no idea about the private and difficult reality of Mrs. Myers's life, and he mocked the appearance of toughness and disaffectedness that she likely presents to the world for her own self-preservation.

Because Leslie and Jess are at the forefront of the novel, readers are privy to the behaviors and ideas they affect and construct to protect themselves from the world. In peeling back the curtain, then, on the lives of minor characters like Janice and Mrs. Myers, Paterson hammers home her point that everyone—even the most unlikely individuals—struggle to hide their private realities.



### SYMBOLS

Symbols appear in **teal text** throughout the Summary and Analysis sections of this LitChart.



### RUNNING

Throughout the novel, running is an ongoing symbol of freedom and escape. At the start of the

story, as Jesse Aarons (or “Jess,” as his friends and family call him) prepares for the start of the new school year, he is determined to become the fastest runner in the fifth grade. He trains daily, determined to prove himself to his classmates on the first day of school. Running, however, is also a way for Jess to escape from the confines of his claustrophobic household, in which his sisters get preferential treatment while Jess himself constantly draws his parents’ ire for being behind on chores—and for engaging in another hobby which is stereotypically feminine: painting. Running is a way in which Jess can both prove his masculinity while also escaping the power structures which demand it, and he is sure that if he can just be recognized at the fastest runner at school, all of his troubles will evaporate. Running, then, is a symbol of the attempt to escape one’s circumstances, one’s fate, or even oneself—and indeed, later in the novel, when Jess endures a terrible tragedy, he attempts to literally run away from the bad news he’s received, only to realize that one can only outrun one’s demons for so long.



## PRINCE TERRIEN

Prince Terrien represents the tendency for love to perpetuate itself. As Christmas approaches, Jess struggles mightily with how to get his relatively new friend Leslie a gift that will accurately reflect how important she’s become to him in the few short months they’ve known each other. Though Leslie’s family has money, Jess’s family is poor—there’s not enough extra for him to use buying Leslie something that she’ll really love. On the way home from school one day, Jess spots a sign advertising free puppies—and instantly knows what to get for Leslie. He gives her the gift of a small black-and-brown puppy whom Leslie names Terrien and appoints the Prince of Terabithia, the stately but silly counterpart to her role as queen and Jess’s as king. Prince Terrien is rarely absent from Leslie’s side, and when Leslie isn’t free to play with him, Jess takes him on runs through the fields of their neighborhood. Prince Terrien, then, symbolizes the ways in which intense love for another person—even when that love is doomed to be cut short—begets even more love, creating connections and ripples that reflect the beauty and magnitude of what two kindred souls can share. In the wake of Leslie’s death, Jess spends more time than ever with Prince Terrien, but ultimately decides that the dog should belong to Leslie’s bereaved parents, Bill and Judy. Prince Terrien—a symbol of Leslie and Jess’s sweet, profound friendship—travels on with Leslie’s parents, further suggesting that the love two people create can live on in unexpected ways.



## THE BRIDGE TO TERABITHIA

The titular bridge to Terabithia initially symbolizes the connection between real life and the imaginary,

and eventually comes to represent a how grief can be utilized and redirected in a positive way. When Jess and Leslie find and create the realm of Terabithia—a place where they can be alone and free from the judgment of their parents, their school bullies, and their overbearing teachers—they select a remote spot in the woods just beyond a shallow but wide creek. The creek is empty, but Jess and Leslie always use a rope swing hanging from a nearby tree to cross the bed. Their swing over to Terabithia becomes a kind of ritual—a symbol of passing between the “real” world and the one they’ve created together. However, Leslie, upon visiting Terabithia alone, falls to her death from the rope during a storm. After this tragedy, Jess must come up with a new way of getting across the creek and so constructs a “bridge” out of a large fallen branch. His sister May Belle becomes stranded on the bridge when she tries to follow him across, but Jess skillfully helps her conquer her fears and clear the bridge. Soon after, Jess begins building a real, stable bridge to Terabithia using lumber from the Burke family’s porch. The bridge Jesse builds himself, board by board, represents the process of grieving. Grief often threatens to create an insulating force which cuts one off from the friends, family, places, and things that matter most—but Jess’s construction of a symbolic bridge between the private world of Terabithia and the “real” world shows that he wants Leslie’s death to bring him closer to those around him rather than isolate him from them further.



## QUOTES

Note: all page numbers for the quotes below refer to the HarperCollins edition of *Bridge to Terabithia* published in 2017.

### Chapter 2 Quotes

“Daddy!” May Belle screamed with delight and started running for the road. Jess watched his dad stop the truck, lean over to unlatch the door, so May Belle could climb in. He turned away. Durn lucky kid. She could run after him and grab him and kiss him. It made Jess ache inside...

**Related Characters:** May Belle Aarons (speaker), Mr. Aarons, Jess Aarons

**Related Themes:** 

**Page Number:** 19

### Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, Jess Aarons watches as his father returns home from a long day at work in Washington, D.C. Jess’s

younger sister, May Belle, excitedly runs down the driveway to meet their father and leap into his arms. Jess watches the moment from afar, furious, jealous, and sad. This passage encapsulates a lot of Jess's struggles at home. The only boy in a family of female siblings, he feels constant pressure to act masculine enough both in and out of the presence of his father, an overworked and short-tempered man who becomes easily incensed when Jess exhibits sensitive or stereotypically feminine behavior. Jess is constantly torn between projecting a front of masculinity and honoring the person he is inside—someone who is complicated, emotional, and curious. As the novel progresses, Jess's father will come to understand his son a little better—but now, in its early pages, Jess is perpetually full of an "ache" for his father's understanding and acceptance.

●● The person had jaggedy brown hair cut close to its face and wore one of those blue undershirtlike tops with faded jeans cut off above the knees. [Jess] couldn't honestly tell whether it was a girl or a boy.

**Related Characters:** Leslie Burke , Jess Aarons

**Related Themes:**   

**Page Number:** 22

### Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, Jess lays eyes on his new neighbor, Leslie Burke, for the very first time. Upon spotting Leslie, who is dressed in raggedy, tomboyish clothes and who has an androgynous haircut, Jess cannot "honestly" tell whether Leslie is male or female. As the novel progresses, Leslie—who shirks gender roles daily by dressing, speaking, and acting in ways that go against her female classmates' rigid behavior—will teach Jess that sometimes, people are not so neatly or easily categorized. Jess feels constrained by the demands of his own gender, and he is constantly trying to impress his father and his friends at school by proving his masculinity to them. With Leslie, there is nothing to prove because there is no judgment—only friendship and love. As the novel continues, Jess will learn to interrogate his own perception of gender roles, as well as the closed-minded perspectives that have been passed on to him by the boys and men in his life.

## Chapter 3 Quotes

●● He felt it before he saw it. Someone was moving up. He automatically pumped harder. Then the shape was there in his sideways vision. Then suddenly pulling ahead. He forced himself now. His breath was choking him, and the sweat was in his eyes. But he saw the figure anyhow. The faded cutoffs crossed the line a full three feet ahead of him.

Leslie turned to face him with a wide smile on her tanned face.

**Related Characters:** Gary Fulcher, Leslie Burke , Jess Aarons

**Related Themes:**  

**Related Symbols:** 

**Page Number:** 34

### Explanation and Analysis

Jess, who has been training on his own all summer to be the fastest runner in the fifth grade, finally gets the chance to show his classmates what he's made of during an individual heat in preparation for a schoolwide race. As Jess luxuriates in the feeling of being fast, invincible, and impressive, however, he feels something coming up behind him. It is none other than Leslie Burke—a girl. Jess fought for Leslie to be able to participate in the race in order to spite the cruel, hyper-competitive Gary Fulcher, but now Jess regrets sticking up for the oddball tomboy. To Leslie, running is just a fun game to play with new friends—to Jess, it is the precarious measure of his social worth and his masculinity. Jess loses his heat to Leslie, a fact which briefly causes him shame—he has been working hard for months to improve, but Leslie beats him with ease and joy. This is yet another instance in which Leslie reminds Jess that when it comes to conformity in terms of social spheres and gender roles, there's no need to stress or pressure oneself—though it will take Jess a little longer to truly learn this lesson.

●● On the bus that afternoon [Jess] sat down beside May Belle. It was the only way he could make sure that he wouldn't have Leslie plunking herself down beside him. Lord, the girl had no notion of what you did and didn't do.

**Related Characters:** Leslie Burke , May Belle Aarons , Jess Aarons

**Related Themes:**  

**Page Number:** 36

**Explanation and Analysis**

After watching Leslie beat all the boys at recess during their races, Jess realizes that Leslie has made herself an unliked outcast both with the girls at school (by not playing with them) and with the boys (by beating them at their own game, quite literally). That afternoon on the bus, Jess makes sure that there's no opportunity for Leslie to sit with him—she has “no notion” of social graces, gender roles, or of how she appears to other people. Jess, whose whole life is constructed around doing whatever it takes to fit in and make himself likable to others, fears Leslie's chaotic energy. As the novel continues, Jess will learn that Leslie is the one who's right—that sacrificing one's true personality or spirit to maintain the bounds of the status quo is painful and wrong—but for now, all he can focus on is protecting himself from being seen associating with the oddball.

place unto itself. Jess and Leslie want to create a haven, and, in founding Terabithia, a place where they make the rules, they succeed.

☞ There in the shadowy light of the stronghold everything seemed possible. Between the two of them they owned the world and no enemy, Gary Fulcher, Wanda Kay Moore, Janice Avery, Jess's own fears and insufficiencies, nor any of the foes whom Leslie imagined attacking Terabithia, could ever really defeat them.

**Related Characters:** Janice Avery, Wanda Kay Moore, Gary Fulcher, Leslie Burke, Jess Aarons

**Related Themes:**     

**Page Number:** 52

**Explanation and Analysis**

After Jess and Leslie find the spot which will become Terabithia and spend weeks working to build their “castle stronghold” and fill it with games and provisions, they look upon what they have made and feel a deep sense of accomplishment and peace. In this passage, Jess and Leslie realize they've fully done everything they set out to do. They've built a place away from their enemies not only at school, but apart from the demons inside each of them. Terabithia is not just a magical land—it's a fortress where fear, insecurity, and pain are checked at the door. Terabithia is a place where Jess and Leslie are invincible—as king and queen, they are in total control of the realm, and their imaginations allow them to believe that nothing terrible could ever happen in Terabithia. Of course, this passage is setting up a heavy bit of foreshadowing—later on in the novel, all of the characters will have to reckon not only with how appearances of happiness, safety, and calm often belie much darker realities, but also with what happens when fear, calamity, and devastation invade the very places one constructs to try to keep them out.

**Chapter 4 Quotes**

☞ “Do you know what we need?” Leslie called to [Jess.] [...] “We need a place,” she said, “just for us. It would be so secret that we would never tell anyone in the whole world about it. [...] It might be a whole secret country,” she continued, “and you and I would be the rulers of it.”

**Related Characters:** Leslie Burke (speaker), Jess Aarons

**Related Themes:**    

**Page Number:** 49-50

**Explanation and Analysis**

After Jess and Leslie set aside their differences and become friends, they realize that what they need is a place that is just for the two of them—a place where they can be themselves away from the prying, judgmental eyes of their classmates. In this passage, Leslie decides they should create a “whole secret country” which the two of them “rule” together—thus, the idea for Terabithia is born. The place will become sacred to both Jess and Leslie, and the moment of its genesis is full of symbolic and thematic weight. Jess and Leslie are building a friendship which will ready them both for the trials and tribulations ahead by being a source of support, light, and courage. They want to create a place that will let them celebrate their individuality and their respective difficulties conforming to gender roles, a place to escape even the shadow of these pressures. The “country” they create, then, must be both physically and ideologically removed from the real world—it must be a

☝ [Jess] wasn't comfortable having Leslie at his house either. [...] Brenda and Ellie always made some remark about "girl friend." His mother acted stiff and funny [and] later she would refer to Leslie's "tacky" clothes. [...] Her hair was "shorter than a boy's." Her parents were "hardly more than hippies." [...] His father had seen Leslie only a few times and had nodded to show that he had noticed her, but his mother said that she was sure he was fretting that his only son did nothing but play with girls, and they both were worried about what would become of it.

**Related Characters:** Mr. Aarons, Mrs. Aarons, Ellie Aarons, Brenda Aarons, Leslie Burke, Jess Aarons

**Related Themes:**   

**Page Number:** 58-59

### Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, Katherine Paterson shows how Jess wrestles with his judgmental family's opinions of Leslie, struggling to keep his idea of her pure in his mind and uncontaminated by his family's cruel and thoughtless opinions about a person they simply can't understand. Jess's friendship with Leslie draws taunts from his sisters, who assume that he must be romantically interested in his new friend. His mother worries that not only Leslie, but also her parents and the Burke family's entire value system, are a negative influence on Jess. His father, of course, fears that any friendship with a girl—even a girl like Leslie—is a direct threat to Jess's masculinity. Jess's friendship with Leslie is pure, platonic, and instructive—they are teaching one another how to be better and braver. Jess's family, though, can't open their minds or hearts wide enough to see that. This illustrates the reasons why Jess and Leslie need Terabithia so badly in the first place—they need to escape the gazes and words of those who don't understand them or their special friendship.

☝ Leslie was more than his friend. She was his other, more exciting self—his way to Terabithia and all the worlds beyond.

**Related Characters:** Leslie Burke, Jess Aarons

**Related Themes:**     

**Page Number:** 59

### Explanation and Analysis

As Jess reels from his family's cruel judgment of Leslie (and of the friendship they share) he considers just what Leslie

means to him. The two of them have grown so close since the founding of Terabithia that he sees her now as an extension, almost, of himself. She is the part of him that is fearless and "exciting," ready for anything and primed for adventure. Leslie has taught Jess to relax his fears about fitting in socially or performing some false idea of masculinity for his parents or friends—she has shown him the way to self-acceptance, even if Jess only feels particularly strong within the bounds of Terabithia. Jess feels that Leslie is the one who creates the magic not just in Terabithia, but in the "worlds beyond" it—Leslie is the one who empowers him to be himself, who helps him feel a new sense of excitement about the world around him, who teaches him to dig deeper past the surface and discover what people and places are really about. Leslie has taught Jess so much—and this passage foreshadows that one day soon, Jess will need to rely heavily on all the important lessons Leslie has taught him.

## Chapter 6 Quotes

☝ "What are you giving your girl friend, Jess?" Brenda screwed her face up in that ugly way she had. [Jess] tried to ignore her. [...]

"Don't you know, Brenda?" Ellie joined in. "Jess ain't got no *girl* friend."

"Well, you're right for once. Nobody with any sense would call that stick a *girl*!" [...] Something huge and hot swelled right up inside of him. [...] Lord, it hurt his guts to realize that it was Brenda who was his blood sister, and that [...] he and Leslie were not related at all. Maybe, he thought, I was a foundling, like in the stories.

**Related Characters:** Ellie Aarons, Brenda Aarons (speaker), Leslie Burke, Jess Aarons

**Related Themes:**     

**Page Number:** 72-73

### Explanation and Analysis

As Christmas approaches, Jess's older sisters Ellie and Brenda fret over what to get their boyfriends for Christmas. When they ask Jess what he's planning on getting his own "girl friend" (Leslie), they tease him mercilessly about Leslie's appearance and Jess's own interest in such a "stick." Jess becomes angry—not only are his sisters willfully misunderstanding his relationship with Leslie, they're trying to insult and denigrate her behind her back. Jess isn't lying when he says that Leslie isn't his girl friend—she is so much

more than that to him, and he even begins to wish that she were his sister. Jess is so profoundly distressed to be misunderstood time and time again by his family that he enters, in this passage, into an escapist fantasy in which he's not even a member of the Aarons clan at all. He wishes he were a "foundling" (a child not biologically related to their parents) because he is casting about for any explanation at all as to why his sisters and parents are so cruel to both him and Leslie. This passage shows that Jess is learning—for better or for worse—to retreat into the realm of fantasy and escapism when his family's criticisms of his friendships, his identity, his gender, or the realities they perceive about him become too much to bear.

## Chapter 7 Quotes

●● Jess tried going to Terabithia alone, but it was no good. It needed Leslie to make the magic. He was afraid he would destroy everything by trying to force the magic on his own, when it was plain that the magic was reluctant to come for him.

**Related Characters:** Leslie Burke , Jess Aarons

**Related Themes:**   

**Page Number:** 83

### Explanation and Analysis

When Leslie's father Bill finishes up the assignment that has been keeping him busy in Washington, D.C., he finally has more time to spend at home and he and Leslie begin fixing up their house. While Leslie and her father work, Jess, afraid to invite himself to intrude upon their plans, tries to visit Terabithia by himself. Without Leslie, however, he doesn't feel capable of creating the "magic" needed to transform Terabithia from a scrap heap on the other side of a low gully into a sacred hidden kingdom across a wide river. This passage shows how deep and intense the bond between Leslie and Jess is—and how much Jess relies on Leslie to show him how to be. As the novel progresses, Jess will need to learn how to make the "magic" not just of Terabithia but of appreciating the "real" world around him, too—and he will have to do it all without Leslie, relying only on the lessons she's taught him.

●● "Janice Avery is a very unfortunate person. Do you realize that?"

"What was she crying about, for heaven's sake?"

"It's a very complicated situation. I can understand now why Janice has so many problems related to people. [...] Did you know her father beats her?"

**Related Characters:** Jess Aarons, Leslie Burke (speaker), Janice Avery

**Related Themes:**  

**Page Number:** 95

### Explanation and Analysis

One day, Leslie finds Janice Avery crying in the bathroom at school. Rather than ignore the seventh-grade bully's obvious distress, Leslie talks to her about what's wrong. That afternoon, in Terabithia, Leslie reveals to Jess all that she has learned. This is both Leslie and Jess's first major reckoning with the idea that things are rarely what they seem to be on the surface. As Leslie gains insight into the reality of Janice's situation, she understands that Janice is a traumatized and "unfortunate" individual who suffers greatly in private but affects an air of power, intimidation, and authority in public to mask that suffering. In this moment, Leslie and Jess begin to understand that Janice is not the only one hiding the truth of who she is—the two of them (and likely countless other members of their school and family communities) are keeping their truths shoved deep down where no one can see or judge them. This moment represents a perspective switch for Jess and Leslie, and opens them up to understanding others just a bit more.

## Chapter 8 Quotes

●● All March it poured. For the first time in many years the creek bed held water, not just a trickle either, enough so that when they swung across, it was a little scary looking down at the rushing water below. Jess took Prince Terrien across inside his jacket, but the puppy was growing so fast he might pop the zipper any time and fall into the water and drown.

**Related Characters:** Leslie Burke , Jess Aarons

**Related Themes:**    

**Related Symbols:** 

**Page Number:** 100

**Explanation and Analysis**

As March arrives, heavy rains begin to fall on the town of Lark Creek. For days and days, incessant storms batter the town—and as they do, the dry gully between Terabithia and Leslie's backyard begins to rise and even flood. As Jess and Leslie continue to visit Terabithia, Jess grows more and more apprehensive about the crossing of the creek—but Leslie seems unafraid. In this passage, as Jess holds Prince Terrien precariously in his jacket, Paterson uses Prince Terrien—a symbol for the friendship between Jess and Leslie—to show how the friendship is growing unwieldy for both of them. As pure and true as the connection Jess and Leslie have is, it is not without its own problems—and as Jess struggles to keep secret his apprehension about crossing the creek, his friendship with Leslie begins to become a burdensome thing which threatens to literally drown him. Jess doesn't pay heed to his own emotions or qualms, however, believing they mark him as oversensitive, weak, and cowardly—he doesn't yet see that he needs to pay attention to his internal emotional state and share it with Leslie. Jess has been taught that vulnerability and sensitivity are bad things—but the only thing worse than being emotionally vulnerable, he will soon see, is keeping one's feelings and instincts locked up inside.

**Chapter 9 Quotes**

☛ For Jess the fear of the crossing rose with the height of the creek. Leslie never seemed to hesitate, so Jess could not hang back. But even though he could force his body to follow after, his mind hung back, wanting to cling to the crab apple tree the way Joyce Ann might cling to Momma's skirt.

**Related Characters:** Mrs. Aarons, Joyce Ann Aarons, Leslie Burke, Jess Aarons

**Related Themes:**    

**Page Number:** 115

**Explanation and Analysis**

As the March rains continue and the creek grows higher and higher, Jess becomes downright terrified to use the rope swing across the creek, but Leslie's enthusiasm and determination are unflinching—she seems impervious to fear. Jess knows that, as a boy, he is expected to be fearless and excited—and he is insecure about the fact that his ability to feign bravery is waning, even in Terabithia. Jess compares himself to his youngest sister, illustrating the feelings of inadequacy and femininity he feels when

confronted with doing something that scares him—and the self-loathing he has learned to internalize when confronted with his own sensitivities. As the days go by and the rain continues, Jess will remain afraid to admit this fear to Leslie or to ask her to hang back. He doesn't want to show her any of his weaknesses—and yet in failing to temper Leslie's bullheadedness, Jess will unwittingly give her a kind of tacit permission to make a decision which has terrible consequences for them both.

**Chapter 10 Quotes**

☛ Entering the gallery was like stepping inside the pine grove [in Terabithia]—the huge vaulted marble, the cool splash of the fountain, and the green growing all around. Two little children had pulled away from their mothers and were running about, screaming to each other. It was all Jess could do not to grab them and tell them how to behave in so obviously a sacred place.

**Related Characters:** Miss Edmunds, Jess Aarons

**Related Themes:**   

**Page Number:** 127

**Explanation and Analysis**

In this passage, Jess is on an impromptu trip to Washington, D.C. alongside his favorite teacher, Miss Edmunds, a free-spirited hippie on whom Jess has a serious crush. Miss Edmunds is the only teacher—and the only person, really, other than Leslie—who has ever encouraged his passion for art. Miss Edmunds, knowing that Jess has likely never been to an art museum, offers to bring him along on a visit to some galleries. As Jess enters the National Gallery in downtown D.C., he feels the same emotions he does upon stepping into Terabithia's sacred pine grove. He is overwhelmed by beauty and feels held by the sense that he is in the presence of something larger than himself. Jess's reverence for these places—places in which magic seems possible—shows how Jess longs for both physical and emotional escape from the mundanity of the world. Art and Terabithia are both forms of escapism and fantasy for Jess—when he's pretending to be the king of a sacred realm or when he's lost in a drawing, he's in total control. Jess is rarely in control of anything in real life—not the way his family perceives him, not the way he reacts to certain high-pressure situations—but in the presence of art and in Terabithia, he is the master of his destiny.

## Chapter 11 Quotes

☞ He ran until he was stumbling but he kept on, afraid to stop. Knowing somehow that running was the only thing that could keep Leslie from being dead. It was up to him. He had to keep going.

**Related Characters:** Leslie Burke , Jess Aarons

**Related Themes:**  

**Related Symbols:** 

**Page Number:** 132

### Explanation and Analysis

After hearing the terrible news about Leslie's untimely death caused by falling from the rope swing over the creek on her way to Terabithia, Jess decides that what he's hearing can't be true. He turns his back on his family and runs out of the house, unsure of where he's going but determined to run as fast and as hard as he can. For the first few chapters of the novel, running was a way for Jess to escape his feelings of insignificance and inadequacy. Running, he believed, would make him more masculine, more popular, and more beloved at home—and yet it was a way to deny his true passion for art and his own insecurity. Now, running reappears as a method of denial. As long as Jess runs, he reasons, he will “keep Leslie from being dead.” This is, of course, an escapist fantasy—but Jess has learned to use running as a way of literally outstripping the truth, and as he runs now, he attempts to replicate that state of mind.

☞ “Well, Momma, he's just sitting there eating pancakes like nothing happened. I'd be crying my eyes out.”

Ellie was looking first at Mrs. Aarons and then at Brenda. “Boys ain't supposed to cry at times like this. Are they, Momma?”

**Related Characters:** Ellie Aarons, Brenda Aarons (speaker), Leslie Burke , Jess Aarons, Mrs. Aarons

**Related Themes:**   

**Page Number:** 138

### Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, the morning after Jess hears of Leslie's death (and reacts by entering a state of detached denial), Jess scarfs pancakes at the kitchen table while his horrified sisters look on. Brenda suggests that Jess should be “crying

[his] eyes out” rather than eating disaffectedly; Ellie, however, points out that boys aren't “supposed to cry,” ever, even in times of serious grief. This passage illustrates profoundly the struggle Jess is no doubt facing internally. There is so much pressure to act the “right” way in difficult times—for Jess, whose masculinity and gender expression is policed at all times, he is caught between a rock and a hard place. If he doesn't emote enough, he seems not truly affected by this tragedy; if he emotes too much, he seems weak and unmanly. No wonder, then, that Jess has entered a state of such remove from the situation and tried to convince himself that Leslie's death is a fiction—he seems paralyzed, unsure of how to affect a reaction which honors his true feelings and yet proves acceptable to his judgmental family.

## Chapter 13 Quotes

☞ Jess raced to the sound of May Belle's cry. She had gotten halfway across on the tree bridge and now stood there grabbing the upper branches, terrified to move either forward or backward.

**Related Characters:** May Belle Aarons , Jess Aarons

**Related Themes:**  

**Page Number:** 153

### Explanation and Analysis

As Jess visits Terabithia alone, he uses a log to build a makeshift bridge to the other side. He wants to get across to see what Terabithia is like in Leslie's absence, and to honor her by building a funeral wreath. As Jess works at this task, however, he hears his sister May Belle cry out for him. She has followed him down to the gully, and is now stuck, “terrified,” on the log. May Belle's precarious situation in this passage externalizes and symbolizes Jess's own internal state of grieving for Leslie. He doesn't feel able to move either backward or forward—he can't move on from his feelings and process them without feeling intense fear, and he can't look back on his memories with Leslie without feeling intense pain. As Jess coaches May Belle down from her terror and helps her cross back to the home side of the ravine, he learns an important lesson about what he himself must do—he must make a decision, change his behavior, and begin the process of getting on with his life without forgetting the lessons Leslie has taught him.

●● It occurred to him that perhaps Terabithia was like a castle where you came to be knighted. After you stayed for a while and grew strong you had to move on. For hadn't Leslie, even in Terabithia, tried to push back the walls of his mind and make him see beyond to the shining world—huge and terrible and beautiful and very fragile? [...] It was up to him to pay back to the world in beauty and caring what Leslie had loaned him in vision and strength.

**Related Characters:** Leslie Burke , Jess Aarons

**Related Themes:**  

**Page Number:** 160-161

### Explanation and Analysis

As Jess continues to mourn Leslie, he realizes that in order to truly honor her and make sure her death was not in vain, he needs to act upon the lessons she taught him and “pay back to the world” all of the goodness, understanding, and kindness Leslie gave him. This passage is the impetus for Jess's final actions in the book—the building of a bridge to Terabithia. Jess once believed that Terabithia needed to be a carefully-kept secret, a place meant for him and Leslie only. Now, however, he sees that Terabithia is more a state of mind than a place—Terabithia is the process of learning to accept oneself, to see the magic in the everyday, and to build up one's sense of courage and curiosity about both oneself and the world. Jess knows that in order to make Leslie's life worthwhile, he needs to share the lessons of Terabithia with others rather than hoard the place to himself.

●● When [Jess] finished, he put flowers in [May Belle's] hair and led her across the bridge—the great bridge into Terabithia—which might look to someone with no magic in him like a few planks across a nearly dry gully.

“Shhh,” he said. “Look.”

“Where?”

“Can't you see 'um?” he whispered. “All the Terabithians standing on tiptoe to see you. [...] There's a rumor going around that the beautiful girl arriving today might be the queen they've been waiting for.”

**Related Characters:** May Belle Aarons , Jess Aarons (speaker)

**Related Themes:**   

**Related Symbols:** 

**Page Number:** 163

### Explanation and Analysis

In the final lines of the book, Jess leads his little sister May Belle—who often used to follow Jess and Leslie down to the creek which demarcates Terabithia from the real world, but was never brave enough to follow them over—across the bridge he's built into his and Leslie's magical realm. Jess is gentle and tender with May Belle, and he does his best to replicate the “magic” and fantasy Leslie so adeptly showed him on their early visits to the sacred realm. This passage shows that Jess, in having built a literal bridge to Terabithia, is ready at last to move on from his grief and to symbolically bridge the terrifying chasm between his life with Leslie and his life without her. Jess knows that the only way to honor Leslie's memory is to give someone else the very things she gave him: a sense not just of self-acceptance but of self love, a feeling of wonder for the natural world, and a sense of reverence for the mystic. Jess honors Leslie's legacy by bringing May Belle to Terabithia and at last sharing the place with others worthy and needful of its lessons.



## SUMMARY AND ANALYSIS

The color-coded icons under each analysis entry make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. Each icon corresponds to one of the themes explained in the Themes section of this LitChart.

## CHAPTER 1

Jess Aarons wakes up early to the sound of his father leaving the house for work in his noisy pickup truck. Jess slides out of bed and pulls on a pair of overalls, then begins tiptoeing from the room. His younger sister, May Belle, sits up and excitedly asks Jess if he's going out for a run. Their youngest sibling, Joyce Ann, is still asleep in the bed she and May Belle share. Jess has been getting up every morning all summer to practice **running** in the fields beyond their home—he is determined to be the fastest in the fifth grade at the start of the new school year. Jess confirms to May Belle that he's going to run. He knows she “worship[s]” him—she is the only one of his three sisters who is nice to him.

The August morning is unseasonably cold. Jess climbs over the backyard fence and into the cow field beyond, where the family's cow, Miss Bessie, is grazing at the patchy grass. Jess crouches low and takes off across the field. He doesn't have great form as a runner, but he has a lot of “grit” for a ten-year-old. At Jess's school, which is underfunded and low on gym equipment, the lower-school boys have started **running** races at recess to pass the time. Jess won one of the races last year, and he hopes that if he wins more this year, he'll lose his reputation as the “crazy little kid that draws all the time.” The former fastest runner in the lower school, Wayne Pettis, is going into sixth grade and Jess wants to make sure that he himself takes the crown.

Jess envisions himself winning as he races across the field. He knows that becoming the fastest **runner** in the fifth grade will make him a star at school—and might also make his reticent, overworked father proud. In the middle of his reverie, Jess hears May Belle calling for him because it is time for breakfast. Jess races back home and sits down at the table, where he older sisters Brenda and Ellie complain about his sweaty stink and beg their mother to force Jess to wash up. While eating, Mrs. Aarons tells her children that there are chores that need doing. Brenda and Ellie protest that they're supposed to go school shopping with some neighbors, and then they wheedle their mother into giving them some money for the excursion. Jess watches his mother give the girls five dollars—even though he knows she doesn't have the money to spare.

*Small context clues in the first passages of the novel establish several important facts about Jess (and foreshadow major themes that will come to play throughout the book). Jess is surrounded by girls, but seemingly disconnected from his father, who leaves the house at the crack of dawn each day. Jess is a hard worker who wants to prove himself to his classmates at school—he cares a lot about the approval of others.*



*Running is a masculine activity for Jess, and a way for him to prove to the other boys in his class that he fits in. This passage also shows that Jess “draws all the time” but is embarrassed by his private hobby and wants to prove himself capable of a more traditional, acceptable activity.*



*This passage shows that even as Jess works himself to the bone in hopes of one day securing his father's begrudging approval, he often watches as his sisters are showered with affection and special treatment. Jess is surrounded by girls, forced to earn his parents' approval in a way his sisters aren't.*



Jess gets stuck doing most of the chores, including milking Miss Bessie and picking beans from the vegetable patch in the yard. In the heat of the afternoon, May Belle comes outside to tell Jess to look across the street—a family is moving into the “ratty old country house” once owned by a family called the Perkins. Jess knows that people who move into the Perkins place never stay for long. Later, the narrator says, Jess will marvel at how “the biggest thing in his life” is a moment he “shrugged [...] off as nothing.”

*This passage foreshadows just how important the people who are moving into the old Perkins house will come to be in Jess's life. This is one of the book's rare moments of overt foreshadowing, and Paterson uses it to suggest that Jess will soon have an antidote to his less-than-ideal home life.*



## CHAPTER 2

Ellie and Brenda, who promised their mother they'd be home from shopping by seven, don't return by the appointed time. As a result, Mrs. Aarons is short-tempered, taking all her rage out on Jess. Jess fixes sandwiches for himself, May Belle, and Joyce Ann since their mother is too tired to make them supper. May Belle says she hopes that the family that moved into the Perkins house has a young girl for her to play with—she's sick of playing with Joyce Ann. Joyce Ann starts to cry, and Jess, annoyed, gets up and goes to his room to draw. Drawing is the one thing that calms Jess down.

*This passage shows how Jess reacts when tensions in his family simply become too much to bear. Between his older sisters' ability to get away with anything and his younger sisters' chaotic neediness, Jess's only escape is through his art—and the fantasy it provides him.*



Jess's drawings are often fantastical renderings of animals in funny, silly situations. As much as Jess loves drawing, he knows he must do it in secret—his father believes that art is a soft, girlish pursuit that is making Jess less of a man. The only person in the world Jess feels comfortable showing his art to is Miss Edmunds, the music teacher at Lark Creek Elementary—a beautiful, young, talented woman with whom Jess is “in love.” Miss Edmunds is the only one who has ever encouraged Jess's art—though Jess's sisters and parents believe the hippie-ish Miss Edmunds is a bad influence, Jess looks forward to her music class each week and admires her individualistic sense of style. Jess feels that neither he nor Miss Edmunds belongs in the “backwards” Lark Creek.

*This passage shows just how out-of-place Jess feels both at home and in his town more largely. Jess has a creative spirit and a need for self-expression—but his parents believe that anything that goes against the norm or challenges prescribed gender roles is suspect or disappointing. Jess longs to break free from the pressure of his parents' judgement.*



Mrs. Aarons calls Jess out of his room, reminding him to go milk Miss Bessie again. While he's out tending the cow, his sisters return home. Jess feels lonely among all the women in his family and longs for the company of his dad, who commutes back and forth to Washington each day. Even when he's home, though, Mr. Aarons is too tired to do anything with Jess at all. Just at that moment, Mr. Aarons's car pulls into the drive. Jess watches May Belle run outside and rush toward it to hug and kiss their father—he wishes he could join her, but any time he expresses any affection, his father pushes him away.

*Jess's father is so fixated on his son learning how to act like a man that he even denies him physical affection. Jess loves his parents, but he isn't allowed to nurture the parts of himself that are soft, tender, or emotional for fear of appearing weak in the eyes of his hypermasculine dad.*



The next morning, Jess gets up early to **run** even though he's tired. While he runs through the field, imagining himself racing against Wayne Pettis, he hears a voice call out to him, teasing him about running away from Miss Bessie. Jess turns to see a person about his age—he can't tell if they are a boy or a girl—sitting on the fence in an undershirt and faded cutoffs. As the person continues talking, explaining that their family has just moved into the house across the street, Jess realizes they are a girl. The girl introduces herself as Leslie Burke, and Jess introduces himself in return, then heads for the house. Leslie asks where Jess is going and if he wants to play, but he insists he has work to do.

### CHAPTER 3

Tuesday is the first day of school. Leslie, it turns out, is in Jess's fifth-grade class—she shows up wearing an undershirt and cutoffs. All the other students are in their Sunday best, but Leslie doesn't notice the strange way they're looking at her outfit. The flustered Mrs. Myers makes space for Leslie's extra desk in the overcrowded basement classroom, then calls Jess up to help distribute books. As Jess approaches Leslie's desk, she smiles and waves at him—but he gives her only a nod in return. As he passes the desk of his friend Gary Fulcher, the boy asks Jess if he's **running** the race today. Overcome with excitement, Jess says he is. When Jess sits back down and begins drawing in his notebook, Gary demands to see it. Jess stomps on Gary's foot to get him to quiet down, earning them both a reprimand from Mrs. Myers.

Because there is no lunchroom at the Lark Creek school, everyone eats in silence at their desks, eagerly anticipating recess. As soon as the bell rings, Mrs. Myers dismisses the girls to the playground first, followed by the excited boys. Gary Fulcher organizes fourth and fifth graders into groups of four to **run** in heats. Jess watches the first few heats with anticipation, cheering when Gary wins one. Soon, Leslie comes over to the area where the boys are running and sits with Jess to watch. When Jess tries to help referee a close race, Gary Fulcher gets angry and suggests that Jess would even let a girl race. The defensive Jess suggests Leslie join after all. Gary assigns Leslie to Jess's heat.

*As Jess meets Leslie for the first time, he has a hard time placing her in one box or another in terms of gender. This foreshadows the ways in which Leslie will come to teach Jess that it's okay to break the mold of conformity, to push back against society's prescribed gender roles, and to enjoy life to its fullest.*



*This passage shows that Jess's classroom environment is, unfortunately, just as stifling as his home life. There is intense pressure to conform and play by the rules from both teachers and other students alike. Leslie sticks out like a sore thumb but doesn't seem to care, while Jess does everything he can to mask the parts of himself that he knows mark him as different from his other friends and classmates.*



*In this passage, Leslie—who is new to Lark Creek Elementary and doesn't yet understand the place's social norms—decides she wants to run with the boys at recess, causing insecurity and strife among her male classmates, including Jess. Running has long been Jess's way of asserting his masculinity and fitting in—but now that Leslie is a part of the races, she threatens all of that.*



When it's time for Jess's race, he enjoys the feeling of **running** alongside his classmates—he can tell that the others notice how much he's improved over the summer. He is close to the finish line when he senses someone gaining on him—he turns to see that it is Leslie. Smiling at him, she overtakes him, then crosses the finish line nearly three feet ahead of him. None of the boys cheer for her—the playground is dead silent. Gary tells Leslie she's not allowed to race in the finals. Jess, furious at having lost, accuses Gary of being scared to race a girl. Gary begrudgingly lets Leslie into the finals—which she wins with ease. After winning, Leslie thanks Jess for letting her participate, then trots off triumphantly to rejoin the girls' area of the playground.

That afternoon, on the bus, Jess sits down next to May Belle—something he rarely does. He doesn't want to be seen sitting with Leslie, who has “no notion” of what's socially acceptable. Leslie tries to speak to Jess on the bus and follows him off at their stop—even though she is calling his name, he ignores her, but he turns to watch as she flies off **running** toward the old Perkins place, natural and beautiful as a wild bird.

## CHAPTER 4

The rest of Jess's first week back to school is terrible. Leslie races the boys each day, rejoicing in her ability to beat them easily. By the end of the week, most of them have stopped **running** altogether, and Jess feels that Leslie has ruined the fun of running for him and the rest of the boys. On Friday, the week's lone bright spot finally arrives in the form of Miss Edmunds's music class. She greets Jess warmly as he walks into the room and asks if he kept up with his drawing over the summer—he says he has, and he promises to bring Miss Edmund some of his work to show her.

As the class gathers and Miss Edmunds begins strumming her guitar, entreating the class to sing along, Jess meets Leslie's eyes across the room. They smile at each other, and Jess privately forgives Leslie. He berates himself for behaving cruelly toward her and decides to treat the oncoming school year as a “new season” in his life.

*Jess is embarrassed to have lost to Leslie, especially after how hard he's been working to improve all summer. Still, it makes him even angrier when Gary tries to exclude Leslie from the final heat, unwilling to withstand any kind of assault on his masculinity. Leslie seems oblivious to the disruption her presence in the races has caused—she simply wants to make new friends and do the things she loves with no concern for social norms.*



*Jess is afraid of Leslie and the threat she represents to his carefully-calculated way of fitting in both at school and at home. Still, he can't deny that there's something about her free spirit he admires deeply.*



*Miss Edmunds's support of Jess's artistic side means the world to him. His feelings of gratitude toward her, it seems, manifest as love or a crush: he's so happy to have someone who sees him as he is without judgement that his feelings take him overboard.*



*After being in the presence of Miss Edmunds—a benevolent, nonjudgmental figure who herself shirks gender roles and social norms—Jess forgives Leslie and decides that he wants to embark upon a friendship with the strange but magnetic girl.*



That afternoon on the bus, Leslie sits with Jess and May Belle and tells them all about her old school in Arlington, a suburb of Washington. Jess asks if Leslie hates it in Lark Creek, and she admits that he does. He asks why she and her parents moved—she replies that her parents are “reassessing their value structure” after realizing that money had become too important to them. They want to live in nature and “think about what’s important.” Leslie says she doesn’t resent her parents for bringing her out here—she still believes the move has the potential to become an adventure.

As the days go by, Leslie continues struggling to fit in at school. For a writing assignment in which students are asked to write about their favorite hobbies, Leslie writes about the obscure pursuit of scuba diving; later, she embarrasses herself in front of Mrs. Myers’s class by admitting that her family doesn’t have a television. Jess can do little to help Leslie other than stand by as the other students mock her. One afternoon, when he notices a group of girls bullying Leslie on the playground, he follows Leslie inside the building after she runs away from them. He sees her go into the bathroom and decides to wait outside for her—when she comes out, she’s been crying, but she refuses to talk to Jess about her feelings.

That afternoon, on the bus, Leslie goes to the back of the bus and sits in the seventh graders’ seats. Jess tries frantically to get her to come back to her regular seat as the biggest, meanest seventh-grade bully of them all, Janice Avery, comes down the aisle. As Janice approaches and threatens to start picking on Leslie, Jess decides to stand up to Janice even though he’s afraid of her. Jess defends Leslie by making a joke about Janice’s weight. Soon, other riders on the bus join in and taunt her, too. Leslie stands up and follows Jess back to their seat, but as Jess looks back, he can see that Janice doesn’t take her eyes off the two of them. Leslie warns Jess that Janice is going to get them back, but Jess insists he isn’t afraid of Janice.

That afternoon, when Jess, Leslie, and May Belle get off at their stop, Leslie asks if Jess wants to play. May Belle says she wants to come along, but Jess tells her to run home. When May Belle protests, Leslie bribes her by offering her some brand-new paper dolls. May Belle follows Leslie and Jess to the Burke house, where Leslie gives her the dolls and sends her happily on her way. Jess and Leslie run out into the field behind Leslie’s house, all the way down to a dried-up creek bed which separates the Burkes’ property from the woods. A rope hangs from a crabapple tree at the edge of the creek, and Jess and Leslie take turns swinging from it.

*This passage shows that Leslie comes from a very different social and economic background than Jess. Her family clearly has money—they have had the option of moving to the rural countryside rather than being forced, like Jess’s dad is, to do whatever is required of them to make ends meet.*



*Though Leslie seemed, at first, impervious to the judgment of her classmates and uninterested in what others thought of her, soon the merciless teasing and bullying begins to get to her. Though Paterson shows how Leslie remains true to who she is, she also offers a glimpse into how hard it is to shirk the status quo.*



*This passage shows how Jess has learned to fight cruelty with more cruelty. Janice is a bully, but Jess mirrors her meanness as he attempts to preemptively defend himself and Leslie against her. Jess is willing to let Leslie experiment with the social atmosphere at Lark Creek to a certain degree—but he knows when she’s gone too far, and he attempts to help her walk back her mistake.*



*Though Jess is sick of being around his sisters all the time, he still wants to play with Leslie—even though she’s a girl just like them. This passage contrasts the ways in which May Belle and Leslie inhabit girlhood. While May Belle is easily distracted by stereotypically feminine games and activities, Leslie, who does not conform to gender roles, is open to doing more adventurous activities that appeal to Jess.*



Leslie declares that they need a secret place that's just for the two of them. She lowers her voice to a whisper and suggests they create a "whole secret country" of which they are the rulers. The idea excites Jess. Leslie suggests they start a "magic country like Narnia" in the woods beyond the creek. Jess doesn't know what Narnia is—and he is frightened of going too deep into the woods—but he agrees to swing over the creek on the "enchanted rope" and help Leslie find a spot for their castle. Leslie doesn't lead them very far into the woods at all before settling on a perfect spot. Leslie names the land "Terabithia."

The two of them spend the next several days and weeks building and preparing Terabithia. Leslie loans Jess her box set of *The Chronicles of Narnia* so that he can learn about how magic lands should be run. Jess feels that Leslie is a better and more natural "ruler" than he—she speaks like a queen while he can "hardly manage English." Jess, however, finds that he can make a contribution to the construction of Terabithia—using materials from his family's scrap heap, he builds them a castle stronghold. Leslie stocks the fort with snacks and water, and the two are satisfied with their creation. Leslie asks Jess to draw a picture of Terabithia to hang on the wall, but he says he's afraid he won't be able to capture its magic. Leslie assures him that someday he will.

One afternoon, Janice Avery accuses Jess of tripping her on the bus. The bus driver makes Jess get out and walk. By the time he meets Leslie in Terabithia, she has been there reading for a long while. Leslie is angry at Janice Avery for framing Jess, and angry at their classmates for letting a "tyrant" like Janice take over the school.

By October, the other students at school have noticed how much time Leslie and Jess are spending together. Gary Fulcher teases Jess about his new "girl friend," but Jess knows that what he and Leslie have is special. At recess, Jess and Leslie often just sit and talk while the other kids play, making jokes about their classmates or the strict, fat Mrs. Myers. Their jokes about Mrs. Myers in particular are cruel—but they distract Jess and Leslie from the judgement of their peers and help them get through the days.

*Jess and Leslie's friendship exists because they're both outsiders. It makes sense, then, that they want to secure a place for themselves away from the prying, judgmental eyes of their families and classmates. They want a place where they're free to be the purest versions of themselves, outside the bounds of social norms they both fail to meet.*



*Terabithia is a place where Leslie and Jess encourage each other's quirks, strengths, and hidden passions. They are building it themselves, bit by bit, and trying to make sure that it is a true refuge from the world. Leslie urges Jess to use Terabithia as a place not just to explore but to celebrate his love of art—but Jess doesn't yet know how to separate his love for art from his shame about that love.*



*This passage, again, shows how Terabithia functions as a safe haven from the cruelties and pressures of life at school, where bullies and other obstacles daily threaten both Jess and Leslie.*



*The more Jess and Leslie find themselves being teased and mocked by their peers, the more they themselves seek to mock others—perhaps as a way of making themselves feel better about their own outsider status, or perhaps as a way of feeling in control of their surroundings.*



By December, the weather has turned cold. Leslie brings two sleeping bags to Terabithia to help keep her and Jess warm—but Jess makes her take them back to her parents' house because he's afraid of angering her parents by taking them. Jess isn't necessarily afraid of Leslie's parents, but he is intimidated by them. Their names are Bill and Judy, and that is what Leslie calls them. They are both writers and intellectuals, and Jess is constantly amazed by the number of books they have in their house. Though the Burkes don't appear to be ultra-rich, Jess can tell from small things about their clothes, their car, and the things in their home that they do not need to worry about money. Jess is afraid that if he spends too much time around Leslie's parents, they'll begin to think he's stupid.

Jess doesn't feel comfortable bringing Leslie to his house, either. Mrs. Aarons acts strange around Leslie (and privately talks judgmentally about Leslie's clothes, wild hair, and "hippie" parents), while his sisters tease Leslie about being their brother's girlfriend. Jess, though, tries not to concern himself with such matters—for the first time in his life, he has been waking up feeling as if he has something to look forward to.

Jess loves visiting Terabithia each day with Leslie. The two of them begin spending a lot of time in the pine forest just beyond their castle—though Jess used to be scared of the trees and worry the place was haunted, he now finds it peaceful. Leslie agrees, and dubs the pine grove a sacred place where the spirits of Terabithia live. She suggests they come into the grove only in times of great sorrow or joy to call upon the spirits for advice.

## CHAPTER 5

Leslie often makes up stories about a band of giants who threaten Terabithia—but in reality, the only "giant" Leslie and Jess have to worry about is Janice Avery. Together with her friends Wilma Dean and Bobby Sue Henshaw, Janice has all but taken over the school in the last several months. She terrorizes kids as young as second-graders on the playground, and daily stands outside the girls' bathroom demanding lunch money in exchange for entry.

*Jess and Leslie come from very different backgrounds. Whereas Jess's family is large, poor, and conservative, Leslie's is small, financially comfortable, and quite liberal—even radical. Jess doesn't want to seem stupid or backwards to Leslie's parents and risk their friendship. Jess is still afraid to show people who he truly is, even though Leslie has helped him come a long way in terms of accepting himself.*



*Jess is not embarrassed by Leslie, per se, but he is still aware of the ways in which her resistance to social cues and gender norms startles and confuses other people. Jess sees Leslie as precious in his mind, and doesn't want to put her in situations where that specialness might be diminished.*



*Terabithia is more than just a hideout or playground—it is an intensely spiritual place where Jess and Leslie feel they can go to investigate the deepest, darkest questions they have about themselves, one another, and their purpose in life.*



*This chapter will show how the real-world threats Jess and Leslie face—too large or frightening to be met head-on in life—become navigable in Terabithia, a place where they can create their own answers and solutions.*



One day, May Belle brings a pack of Twinkies to school as a snack—she is excited about them, as they are a rare treat that Mr. Aarons has brought back from Washington, and she brags to her friends about them on the bus. At recess, May Belle approaches Jess and Leslie in tears—Janice has stolen her Twinkies. She begs Leslie and Jess to beat Janice up “into a million pieces,” but Jess says there’s no use in fighting, and Leslie adds that Jess would only get thrown out of school for hitting a girl. Leslie solemnly promises May Belle, though, that they’ll come up with a plan to get Janice back.

That afternoon, in Terabithia, Leslie and Jess hold a war council. They strategize about how they can get Janice back without getting in trouble themselves. They toy with the idea of having a teacher catch her smoking in the girls’ bathroom but decide it’s too risky. Eventually, they come up with a plan to humiliate Janice in a way that keeps their identity secret. Leslie realizes that Janice has a crush on Willard Hughes. She plots to write a letter to Janice ostensibly from Willard asking her to meet him behind the school one day—then have Janice show up to find she’s been “ditched.” Leslie dictates the fawning love letter to Jess as Jess sits in awe of Leslie’s imagination.

The next morning, Jess and Leslie sneak into school early. Leslie creates a distraction at the seventh-grade classroom door while Jess finds Janice’s desk and puts the note inside. At recess, Jess and Leslie watch as Janice huddles with Wilma and Bobby Sue, discussing the letter. That afternoon, Janice is not on the bus home—Wilma tells the bus driver it’s okay to leave without her, as she has a “heavy date.” Another boy on the bus asks who the date is with. When Wilma says it’s with Willard Hughes, the other boy tells her that Willard is already on another bus home. As news spreads throughout the bus, the rest of the children hoot and holler at Janice’s misfortune. That afternoon, in Terabithia, Jess admits that he feels slightly bad about what they’ve done to Janice. Leslie insists the big bully deserved exactly what she got.

The next day, on the bus, Janice Avery stomps down the aisle, her eyes full of hatred. May Belle marvels at the horrific expression on Janice’s face and asks Leslie and Jess if they are the ones who made her that mad. Leslie tells her they’re the ones responsible—but she warns May Belle not to breathe a word of what she knows. May Belle agrees, her eyes shining with admiration.

*Though Jess often finds May Belle silly or ridiculous, he and Leslie are still incensed when they find she’s being picked on by the cruel Janice Avery. Leslie—fair and empathetic as always—vows revenge on May Belle’s behalf, and, given her disregard for fitting in, following rules, or being polite, it seems more than likely that she will make good on her promise.*



*Leslie and Jess hatch a plan to get back at Janice after retreating to Terabithia to search for the answer in their safe, sacred place. Leslie and Jess know they can’t physically intimidate Janie, and they don’t want to use a tactic that might make school even harder for them—so they choose a sneaky maneuver which confuses Janice’s sense of reality.*



*Jess has a complicated moral reaction to his and Leslie’s prank on Janice. Though Leslie feels that they were justified in embarrassing Janice in front of the school, Jess’s ambivalence foreshadows the book’s reckoning with how to treat others—and its thesis that everyone, even bullies, are wrestling with problems much deeper than their outward demeanor might suggest.*



*Leslie and Jess came through for May Belle, and though Jess doesn’t feel totally great about it, he can’t deny that making his little sister feel a little safer and more powerful is a good thing.*



## CHAPTER 6

As Christmas approaches, Ellie and Brenda become “obsessed” with buying presents for their boyfriends at school. Mrs. Aarons attempts to remind them that there’s not enough money to spare for such things. Ellie and Brenda tease Jess about what he’s getting for his girlfriend—before declaring that no one in their right mind would call Leslie a real girl. Jess becomes hurt and angry, and he wishes that Leslie were his sister instead of Brenda. He begins to fantasize that he doesn’t belong to his family at all and was instead found at birth in a basket like Moses.

Jess is, in fact, upset that he has nothing to give Leslie for Christmas. He considers giving her some drawings, but the gift seems too intimate and personal, and he doesn’t feel he could make any drawings good enough for Leslie. The last week of school before the holiday, as Jess pools his money with his sisters to buy May Belle a Barbie doll, he frets over being unable to afford anything for Leslie. He wishes he could buy her a TV, but he knows it’s stupid to even think about such an extravagant gift. One day, riding the bus home from school and looking out the window in misery, Jess spies a sign out the window and asks the bus driver to let him out right away. The sign reads “PUPPIES, FREE.”

On the afternoon of Christmas Eve, Jess and Leslie meet in Terabithia. Jess has put a ribbon around the puppy’s neck, and keeps it in his jacket as he swings over the creek bed, believing that crossing into Terabithia any other way would be bad luck. Leslie is delighted by the gift—she decides to name the dog **Prince Terrien** and appoint him guardian of Terabithia. Leslie gives Jess his gift next—it is a large, beautiful art set, complete with a pad of fine paper. Jess hardly has words to thank Leslie for the beautiful present. As the two of them spend more time with the silly, energetic Prince Terrien, they realize he’s more suited to the role of fool than guardian, but they decide that even princes can be fools.

That night, the “glow” of the magical afternoon with Leslie and **Prince Terrien** remains with Jess even as his family bickers and squabbles. The next morning, May Belle gets her Barbie while Jess receives a racing-car set. Jess struggles to set the thing up—much to his father’s dismay. Mr. Aaron calls the toy a piece of “junk” and nearly kicks it. As the day dissolves into misery, Brenda expresses jealousy over Ellie’s gifts and Joyce Ann breaks one of her new toys. Mrs. Aarons sends Jess outside to milk Miss Bessie. Out in the yard, he runs into Leslie, who has come over to wish him a merry Christmas. As Prince Terrien yips and jumps around Miss Bessie, Jess feels himself flooded with Christmas spirit for the first time all day.

*Jess feels that his and Leslie’s relationship defies categorization. They are both outsiders who deviate from social and gender norms, and yet his family doesn’t seem to understand the ways in which their friendship is special—as a result he feels defensive and misunderstood. He longs for the feelings of support and freedom he feels around Leslie.*



*As Christmas draws near, Jess frets that he won’t be able to find a gift for Leslie that will really show her how much she means to him. Luckily, however, when he spots the “free puppies” sign, he is inspired by a gift that says more than an object ever could—a living, breathing emblem of all the comfort and joy their friendship has brought him.*



*As Jess and Leslie exchange their Christmas gifts, it becomes even more apparent just how special a place Terabithia is—it is truly the one place Jess and Leslie can be fully themselves and celebrate their quirks and secret passions. They even extend this grace to Prince Terrien—even the hapless pup isn’t bound to a certain role or set of behaviors within the realm of Terabithia, as he can be both a prince and a fool.*



*This passage shows how Leslie and Prince Terrien have become closer to family to Jess than his actual blood kin. At home, Jess is constantly subjected to outbursts of strife, rage, and discord; he is continually a disappointment to his father, who is always on edge, and his mother, who is always exhausted and frazzled by the chaos in the house. With Leslie and Prince Terrien things are simple and easy, and Jess is free to be his truest self.*



## CHAPTER 7

After Christmas, Leslie's father Bill, who has been busy commuting back and forth to Washington for the last several months while working on his latest book, finally gets a break. He decides to start repairing the old Perkins house with Leslie's help. As a result, Leslie is often busy with her father, so Jess tries to go to Terabithia alone a few times—but without Leslie, the place is devoid of magic. At his own home, someone always wants something from Jess. Whether his mother is pestering him about chores or May Belle and Joyce Ann are begging him to play, Jess can't get a quiet moment alone.

Though Jess is often lonely and bored, Leslie is happy—she loves helping her father fix up the house, and she tells Jess that the more time she spends with the man, the more she understands him. Jess is shocked—it never occurred to him that one was meant to understand one's parents at all. The more Leslie talks about her father, the more standoffish she notices Jess being—eventually, she confronts him about it, asking if he doesn't like Bill. Jess says it's not that he doesn't like Bill—rather it's that he's worried Leslie doesn't want him around anymore now that she's spending so much time with her dad. Leslie tells Jess that he's welcome over any time—and soon, Jess begins spending his afternoons helping Leslie and her father work on the repairs.

Bill often compliments Jess's skill with tools and capacity for hard work, but Jess still feels stupid and inferior around the Burkes. However, as they get deeper and deeper into refinishing the living room, Jess learns to relax and enjoy being in their home. Sometimes, Judy will read them poetry while they work—and sometimes, though the poetry is in another language, Jess learns to simply let the sounds of the words wash over him.

After several weeks, the living room is at last finished. Jess, Leslie, and Bill have painted it gold and refinished the original floorboards—Leslie feels the room is now filled with “golden enchantment.” As she compares the room to a magical kingdom, she nearly spills the beans about Terabithia but catches herself at the last moment—Jess is grateful that the place is still their special secret.

*Jess is lonely for the first time in months. Without Leslie, he feels totally alone, uncertain of how to make the “magic” of Terabithia manifest or how to handle his chaotic home life. This passage foreshadows the ways in which Jess will soon need to learn how to sustain himself alone, with only the memories of what Leslie's friendship has taught him.*



*Jess has been afraid to be around Leslie's parents, fearing that they won't like him—or that they (or worse, Leslie) will realize he's not a special or smart enough person to be worthy of their time. Leslie, though, only wants to get closer to Jess and bring him into her life more—this fact is a relief to Jess, and it allows him to begin exploring new relationships and a new part of himself to boot.*



*Jess has been made to feel so inferior at home that it takes him a while to relax around the Burkes. Jess's anxieties about not being masculine enough, smart enough, or helpful enough lessen as he's welcomed into the Burkes' warm, accepting home.*



*Jess has, perhaps, been afraid that Leslie doesn't need Terabithia anymore—but in this moment, as she protects the secret of their world even in front of her parents, he knows for sure that Terabithia is still their special place.*



The next afternoon, after more than a month away from Terabithia, Jess and Leslie grab **Prince Terrien** and cross the creek bed. Leslie wonders how the kingdom has fared in their absence and makes up a story about having been away fighting along the kingdom's northern border. The two pick up sticks and enact a final battle—safe again in their kingdom, they rejoice over the retreat of their enemies, and give thanks for peace in Terabithia at the pine grove.

A few days later, Leslie comes out to recess and tells Jess that she has heard Janice Avery crying in the bathroom—she can tell it was Janice because the name Willard Hughes was written (and crossed out) on the girl's sneakers. Jess says they should do something to help Janice—Leslie is skeptical, but after Jess pressures her, she agrees to go check on Janice. Jess follows her into the building but waits at the bathroom door. He hears talking, crying, and even loud sobbing coming from within—but as the classes pour back in from recess, he abandons his post, not wanting to be caught hanging around the girls' room.

All through class that afternoon and during the entire bus ride home, Jess tries to get Leslie's attention, hoping to find out what transpired in the bathroom. She doesn't give him the scoop, however, until they're safe in Terabithia. Leslie solemnly reveals that Janice's father beats and abuses her. Janice was crying in the bathroom, Leslie says, because Janice confided in Wilma and Bobby Sue about the abuse—only to have her two best friends “blab” her secret throughout the school. Jess, knowing how fast rumors spread at the tiny Lark Creek school, feels pity for Janice.

Leslie reveals that she advised Janice to pretend like she'd never heard the rumor before in her life and shake it off—she advised her that in a few days, the gossip would die down. Leslie tells Jess that she believes she now has “one and one-half friends” at Lark Creek. Jess thrills at the idea that he is Leslie's only whole friend.

That night, in their bedroom, May Belle whispers to Jess and tells him that she followed him and Leslie this afternoon—now she knows where they go to hide from everyone else. Jess threatens May Belle, warning her that there'll be trouble if she ever follows them again; in return, May Belle threatens to tell their mother about the secret hiding place. Jess begs May Belle to keep his secret, and May Belle agrees. Jess makes May Belle swear on the Bible, then gets into bed. As he falls asleep, he worries that his life becomes “delicate as a dandelion.”

*The fake “war” Jess and Leslie have been fighting could be read as Jess's real, internal war with himself—a war in which he had to face off against his insecurities and self-loathing in order to realize just how loved and unconditionally accepted he is by Leslie and her parents.*



*This passage suggests that things with Janice Avery are not all they seemed to be. Leslie, who was more than excited to humiliate Janice just a couple months ago, now experiences an internal conflict as she begins to realize that there may be more to Janice than meets the eye.*



*Terabithia is a safe place for Jess and Leslie—but in this passage, Leslie makes it clear that Terabithia is also a sacred space in which other people's journeys, struggles, and indeed their secrets are honored. Leslie knows what Janice has been through, and she doesn't want to add to the girl's shame or humiliation in the real world.*



*Leslie extends her empathy, advice, and even a kind of friendship to Janice, finally recognizing that Janice has been putting on a show of strength in order to mask the darker traumas and weaknesses within her.*



*Every time someone comes close to discovering the secret of Terabithia—or every time Jess or Leslie comes close to talking about it with other people—the two of them manage to find a way to keep the place's location and meaning hidden. This foreshadows that something devastating is going to happen in Terabithia—and no one will be able to prevent it, because no one even knows about its significance or location.*



## CHAPTER 8

Throughout March, it rains for the entire month. Jess and Leslie continue to visit Terabithia even in the bad weather, but Jess becomes increasingly nervous about navigating the rope swing—especially when **Prince Terrien** comes along, as he is getting bigger and harder to take across on the swing.

As Easter approaches, Jess's older sisters begin to worry about what they'll wear to church. The family only goes once a year on Easter, and the visit is a big one. Mrs. Aarons tells Brenda and Ellie that she'll take them shopping soon—but one afternoon, Mr. Aarons brings home the news that he's been laid off from work. Brenda and Ellie react with tears, refusing to go to church if there's no money for new clothes. Mrs. Aarons tries to get them to see that there's more going on than their own problems, but the girls continue pressing the issue until Jess can't take it anymore and goes outside to milk Miss Bessie.

Leslie comes into the barn while Jess is milking the cow and sits with him. He tells her about the sad news—and Brenda and Ellie's self-centered reactions to not being able to afford new Easter clothes. Leslie says she'd like to go to church on Easter. Jess is baffled as to why Leslie would want to go sit through a church service when she doesn't have to, he agrees to ask his mother if she can come along. As Jess and Leslie play around the barn, squirting milk at each other and having a laugh, they don't notice Mr. Aaron entering. As soon as Jess sees his solemn father, he bids Leslie goodbye and follows the man inside.

In the end, Mrs. Aaron is able to scrounge up enough money to buy all the girls in the family something new to wear to church. Jess says that since he's not getting anything new, he should be allowed to bring a friend to church—he suggests Leslie. Mrs. Aarons is nervous about whether Leslie will dress well and behave herself, but Jess assures her Leslie will be on her best behavior. Indeed, on Easter Sunday, Leslie is dressed primly in a blouse and skirt. She is polite to the Aaronses and pays close attention to the service throughout its entirety—even when Jess and the other kids cut up or doze off.

*This passage foreshadows trouble. Though Leslie seems to have no qualms about risking falling into the creek, the more practical Jess's apprehension shows that there is indeed something to be afraid of. He doesn't want to alienate himself from Leslie, though, by admitting to his fears.*



*Jess is frustrated and angered by his sisters' self-centered, short-sighted natures. Jess knows the gravity of their family's situation and respects it, and yet he's always the one in trouble while his sisters get away with terrible behavior.*



*When Mr. Aaron walks into the barn to find Leslie and Jess joking around and enjoying themselves—especially at such a serious time—Jess realizes that he's disappointed the man. Even though Brenda and Ellie's behavior is worse than his own, Jess knows that his father holds him to different standards because he's the only boy in the family.*



*Leslie is careful to abide by stereotypical gender roles and strict, careful behavior when she's out with Jess's family. This shows that she respects their family's rules and codes of behavior—she's willing to change herself for Jess, her best friend.*



At the end of the service, Leslie tells Jess that she's glad she came—she liked it “better than a movie” and found the story of Jesus beautiful and interesting. May Belle pipes up and says that the story of Jesus scares her. Jess agrees with his sister, telling Leslie that God killed His son because humans are “all vile sinners.” Leslie says she's not sure if she believes that's true. May Belle tells Leslie that she has to believe the things in the Bible—if not, God will damn her to hell when she dies. Leslie laughs May Belle off, but May Belle is insistent—she's worried what will happen to Leslie, a nonbeliever, when she dies.

*This dark passage offers a bit of foreshadowing. Until now, the narrative has been all about fun, friendship, and life—but May Belle's terror of death and Leslie's existentialism after her first visit to church offer hint that there are darker times on the horizon for these characters.*



## CHAPTER 9

On Easter Monday, the rain starts up again with the same fury it possessed all of March. Jess and Leslie are bored and decide to go to Terabithia in spite of the pouring rain. Leslie pulls on her rain gear and finds boots and a coat for Jess to borrow. As Judy watches them get ready to head out into the weather, she says that she used to love to play in the rain when she was a girl, too.

*Jess and Leslie don't think anything of going to Terabithia in the rain, and Leslie's mother doesn't sense any danger either—but the shift in weather portends something is afoot.*



When Jess and Leslie get to the creek, they stop and look down in awe. The creek bed, usually dry, is now flooded with rushing water. As Jess looks at the rope swing, he gets a bad feeling in the pit of his stomach and suggests they turn back. Leslie, though, is determined to get across. She cradles **Prince Terrien** in her left arm, grabs the rope with her right, and takes a running start. She lands successfully on the other side and swings the rope back over to Jess. Jess grabs it, steels himself, and swings across, landing clumsily on his bottom.

*Though Jess is full of fear when he looks down on the rushing creek, Leslie isn't intimidated at all. This is the first real difference of opinion they've had in their friendship—but Jess is afraid to say anything. He doesn't want to alienate Leslie or put distance between himself and Terabithia.*



Jess and Leslie continue to visit Terabithia throughout the week, even as the creek continues to rise and flood the banks on either side of it. Jess continues to feel afraid each time, even though Leslie seems fine. On Wednesday, as the two of them sit in their castle, a flood of rain comes down and soaks them. Leslie says she believes evil forces have put a “curse” on their beloved kingdom. She suggests they go to the pine grove and talk with the spirits. Jess follows Leslie into the pines, playing along as she very seriously addresses the spirits of the realm. Jess shivers in miserable silence, worried that he has lost the magic and is unfit to be king of Terabithia.

*Jess's fear makes him feel different from Leslie for the first time in their friendship. This alienation leads to the belief that he's somehow unfit for Terabithia. Jess's home life has taught him that if he expresses any difference or dissent, he'll be valued less—and he doesn't want that to happen in his friendship with Leslie.*



On Wednesday night, Jess wakes up in the early hours of the morning to the realization that it is still raining. He understands that tomorrow, if Leslie wants to go to Terabithia, he'll have to tell her he doesn't want to go. He's afraid to turn down a trip to their realm and leave Leslie to go alone, but at the same time, he remembers that he went alone while she was busy working on the house a few months ago. He hates that he is afraid to go to Terabithia in the rain—and that no matter how hard the rain falls or how high the creek swells, Leslie will still want to go.

*This is, again, the first difference Jess and Leslie have encountered in their friendship. Jess is so determined to keep the magic of Terabithia alive for Leslie—even as it wanes for him—that he develops an acute sense of anxiety about how to tell Leslie the truth (or how to hide it from her).*



## CHAPTER 10

In the morning, Jess wakes to the sound of his dad's pickup truck. Mr. Aarons has been going out each morning looking for odd jobs, desperate to continue bringing in an income. Jess crawls out of bed, planning on going to milk Miss Bessie. May Belle wakes and tells him she can't sleep because of the rain. He invites her to come out to the living room, where they can watch cartoons after the cow is tended.

*Mr. Aarons is determined to provide for his family even in difficult, sad times. Jess knows he must step up as well and be strong for his mother and sisters.*



Jess milks Miss Bessie, worrying all the while about what will happen if the creek is still full come summer—he'll have to let Leslie teach him how to swim, a skill he's terrified of learning. He hates himself for having no "guts" and wishes he could simply be braver. He knows that Leslie would never make fun of him for being afraid—but at the same time, he is still working up the courage to admit to Leslie on this very day that he doesn't want to go to Terabithia.

*As close as Jess and Leslie have become, there's still a part of him that's afraid to share his truest, deepest self with Leslie. He doesn't want to alienate her or push her away, and he doesn't fully trust that their relationship is solid enough to withstand him telling the truth about the most embarrassing parts of himself.*



May Belle calls Jess inside, telling him that someone is on the phone for him. He never gets phone calls, but he rushes over and takes the call all the same. Miss Edmunds is on the other end—she tells Jess that she's planning on driving down to Washington to visit some art museums, and she offers to take him along. Jess starts sweating and feels his breath quicken. He tells Miss Edmunds he needs to get permission. He leaves her on the line while he runs to his parents' room and tells his mother that he's going to Washington for the day. Mrs. Aarons, still asleep, barely answers, but Jess takes her grunts as good enough as permission. He returns to the phone and gives Miss Edmunds the good news. He gives her directions to his house, and she tells him she'll pick him up in twenty minutes.

*Jess is elated and excited by Miss Edmunds's invitation—which is also the perfect excuse to avoid Terabithia for the day. He is so afraid of missing the opportunity that he barely secures permission from his mother—perhaps afraid she'll forbid him from going—and doesn't tell May Belle where he's headed for fear she'd somehow stop him. Jess doesn't think of Leslie, either—as intense as their friendship is, Jess still longs for the specific feelings of validation Miss Edmunds's attention brings.*



Jess doesn't think about inviting Leslie along until Miss Edmunds has already driven them beyond the bounds of town. Jess secretly admits to himself that he's happy to be alone with Miss Edmunds and he ignores the guilt he feels at realizing it. Miss Edmunds asks if Jess has ever been to an art museum, and he tells her he hasn't. She tells him happily that now her life has been "worthwhile."

*Miss Edmunds clearly wants to help Jess get more in touch with his artistic side and nurture his creative streak. Jess, however, is just grateful for her company—even though it rivals his attention to Leslie.*



Entering the National Gallery feels like entering the pine grove in Terabithia—sacred and awe-inspiring. Miss Edmunds explains certain paintings to Jess, and he is torn between which is more beautiful—the art, or her. At lunchtime, Miss Edmunds buys them both a meal at the museum’s cafeteria. Jess protests, but Miss Edmunds insists that as a “liberated woman,” she always insists on paying when she invites a man out to dine. After a visit to the Smithsonian, Miss Edmunds and Jess exit to find that the sun has come out. The sun continues shining as the two drive back to Lark Creek, and Jess can hardly contain how excited he is to tell Leslie all about his day.

After Miss Edmunds drops Jess at home he goes inside, feeling as if he’s “jiggling” with joy—but as he heads into the kitchen, he realizes that something is wrong. His family is seated together at the kitchen table, but no one is eating. As Jess enters the room, his mother looks up at him and begins sobbing. Jess asks what’s happening, and Brenda snottily says that his “girl friend” is dead—and everyone thought, until now, that Jess was dead, too.

## CHAPTER 11

Jess feels something whirling about in his head. His mouth feels dry, and he can’t understand what’s happening. Mr. Aarons speaks up and says that Leslie was found in the creek, dead. Jess insists that Leslie was a good swimmer and couldn’t have drowned—his father retorts that she fell when the rope swing broke and hit her head as she fell. Jess shouts that he doesn’t believe his father. He looks around at the rest of his family, hoping someone will speak up and say it’s all a cruel joke—as he looks at the wide-eyed May Belle, he hears her words about Leslie being damned to hell in his head.

Jess turns around **runs** out of the house. He keeps running all the way down the main road. He tries to make sense of the facts flooding his mind, but processing what he’s been told doesn’t get any easier as he pushes on. Soon, he hears his father’s truck coming up the road behind him. Jess tries to outrun the truck—but his father pulls up ahead, gets out, approaches Jess, and scoops him up in his arms. Jess gives himself over to the “numbness” in his brain.

*Though Jess feels slightly guilty about leaving Leslie behind and not inviting her along, he can’t help but feel the same feelings that Terabithia inspires within him as he walks alongside Miss Edmund, taking in the most beautiful art he’s ever seen. Art provides Jess with the same feelings of exhilaration and escapism that fantasy does.*



*Jess’s perfect day with Miss Edmunds is brought to a screeching halt as his family delivers the horrific, painful news that Leslie has died. The book’s twist, painful as it is, illustrates the importance of enjoying one’s friendships while they last.*



*Jess cannot believe what has happened to Leslie—even though it confirms his bad feelings about crossing the creek in such heavy rains. He is devastated by the loss of Leslie—and in denial about his inability to reverse the course the day has taken or bring Leslie back somehow.*



*Running, in this passage, provides Jess an escape from his feelings. Just as earlier in the book, running provided Jess with a feeling of empowerment and a false sense of being able to escape the truth of who he was, running here allows him to replicate those same sensations.*



Jess wakes with a jerk from a dream he can't remember. He can see that it is the middle of the night—his sisters are asleep in the bed next to his own. He remembers hearing that Leslie was dead—but assumes the news must have been part of his dream. He knows that if he went across the street right now, he'd find Leslie, ready and waiting to go on a moonlight journey to Terabithia. He regrets not inviting Leslie along to Washington, but looks forward to telling her all about his day there. He imagines telling Leslie, finally, that he was afraid to go to Terabithia this morning in the rain and feels a coldness spread in his stomach. He decides to go back to sleep—as he does, he looks forward to seeing Leslie the next day.

In the morning, Jess wakes up to find that his sisters are already out of bed. He realizes that he forgot to milk Miss Bessie last night, and that he has probably missed taking care of her this morning. He pulls his sneakers on and hurries to the kitchen, but his mother tells him that Mr. Aarons is already taking care of Miss Bessie. Mrs. Aarons asks Jess if he wants some breakfast, and he says he does—he realizes that he hasn't eaten anything since yesterday afternoon. He sits down at the table with Brenda and Ellie and begins eating pancakes. Brenda snottily states that if her boyfriend died, she wouldn't be able to eat a bite—she'd be crying her eyes out. Ellie says that boys aren't supposed to cry. Jess tunes his sisters out as he stuffs his mouth with food.

Mr. Aarons comes in from milking Miss Bessie. As he passes Jess's chair, he puts a hand on his son's shoulder. He then tells Jess that it's time for them all to go across the street and pay their respects. Jess asks what he's talking about. Mr. Aarons puts his hand on Jess's hand and reminds him that Leslie is dead. Without a word, Jess gets up from the table and puts his jacket on.

## CHAPTER 12

Mr. Aarons and Mrs. Aarons walk Jess over the Burkes'. They knock at the front door—Jess can immediately hear **Prince Terrien** begin to bark. A man Jess doesn't know lets them inside, and they proceed into the beautiful golden room. Leslie's grandmother comes over and introduces herself to the Aarons—she tells Jess that she's heard a lot about him from Leslie. As she begins to cry, Jess feels uncomfortable—he thinks there's something wrong about an old woman showing her emotions like that. He wishes the weeping adults around him would be proud of him for not crying.

*Jess has fooled himself into believing that Leslie is still alive. He feels such regret over not inviting her along to Washington—and over not being with her at the creek at the moment she fell—that he doesn't want to believe there's no time to amend the mistakes he's made in their friendship, tell her the truth, and make things all right.*



*In this passage, Jess's sisters try to police his reaction to Leslie's death and imply that he should be grieving in some way other than the way he is. This passage also illustrates how Jess, as a boy, is caught in a perpetual bind when it comes to showing emotion—if he doesn't show enough, he's a robot, but if he shows too much, he's a sissy or a failure as a man.*



*This passage suggests that Jess has willingly been trying to deny the fact of Leslie's death—but after witnessing a rare display of emotion and affection from his father, he understands how serious the stakes are and pulls himself out of his self-imposed fantasy.*



*As Jess and his parents arrive at the Burkes' house to pay their respects, Jess seems to have eased out of his flat sense of denial—but he is still unable to process his grief or to understand or empathize with the grief others are feeling.*



Jess realizes that he is the only person his age whose best friend has died—and that this fact will make him “important” at school, at least for a little while. He wonders if his sisters will even treat him differently. He wishes he could see Leslie’s corpse laid out, and hopes that her parents will bury her in her blue jeans.

Bill comes into the room and wraps Jess in a hug. Jess doesn’t move as he feels Bill’s body shaking with sobs. He wants to pull away but knows that seeing Bill cry would be worse than enduring the hug. He wishes Leslie would come help him get out of this terrible situation. Bill finally pulls away from Jess and tells him that Leslie loved him. Jess thinks that Bill’s tone and demeanor are straight out of “an old mushy movie”—a movie he and Leslie might have made fun of if they’d seen it together.

As the adults begin talking, Jess overhears Bill tell his parents that Leslie has been cremated. Jess feels something inside his head click as he realizes that Leslie is gone forever and turned to ashes. Jess becomes filled with rage—Leslie, who “belonged to him,” is gone, and now all these adults are standing around crying not for her but for themselves. Jess believes that he is the only one who has ever truly cared for Leslie—and yet he feels she has “failed” him by dying and leaving him alone.

Jess leaves the Burkes’ abruptly and runs home crying angry tears. May Belle excitedly asks if Jess got to see Leslie’s corpse, and Jess hits her in the face. He rushes to his bedroom, retrieves the paints and paper she gave him for Christmas, and runs out of the house toward the woods. At the flooded creek, he screams and throws his art supplies into the muddy water, then watches them float away.

Mr. Aarons comes up behind Jess and tells him he’s done a “damn fool thing.” Jess, weeping, says he doesn’t care. Mr. Aarons pulls Jess into his lap and comforts him as Jess sobs, shouting that he hates Leslie. His father replies only that grieving is “hell.” Jess asks if hell is real, reminding his father of what May Belle said about nonbelievers being damned. Mr. Aaron assures Jess that God doesn’t send “little girls” to hell. Jess says he didn’t mean what he said about hating Leslie. His father nods, and they head back to the house together.

*Jess seems to have an inkling that people will want to remember Leslie differently in death, ignoring the person she was in life—he feels that to ignore Leslie’s individuality and insistence on being her own person would be to invalidate her memory.*



*Jess seems distant from everything happening around him—he’s unable to absorb other people’s feelings or even recognize them as real. He misses the shorthand he and Leslie had, and wishes, impossibly, that she were there to help him process what’s happening. Jess doesn’t yet understand that his friendship with Leslie has given him all the tools he needs—he’s too mired in his own grief.*



*Jess and Leslie were so close that he now feels he knew her better than anyone else. Jess is angry at the idea that other people have been allowed to decide what’s best for Leslie, even in death, and that they feel they have as much a right to grieve her as he does.*



*Jess doesn’t know how to process his grief over Leslie—it is too raw and too fresh. He is furious with everyone around him and lashes out in anger rather than allowing himself to feel his feelings.*



*In this passage, Jess throws away his paints—which he associates both with Leslie and with his true self—into the creek, hoping to abandon them forever. His father, however, in yet another rare show of affection, lets Jess know that it’s okay to be sad—and that it’s okay to be himself. Though the two men don’t exchange many words, something changes between them in this scene as they fully expose their fears and vulnerabilities to one another at long last.*



Back at the house, everyone is kind and gentle with Jess—except for May Belle, who’s still angry with him. Jess doesn’t know how to apologize to his sister. Later that afternoon, Bill comes by and asks Jess to watch **Prince Terrien** for a couple days while the Burkes go to Pennsylvania to scatter Leslie’s ashes. Jess agrees, wishing he could apologize to Bill for running away earlier but unsure of how to find the words. That night, Jess hugs Prince Terrien as he falls asleep.

*Being able to reunite with Prince Terrien helps Jess to process his own internalized grief—even if he makes only a little progress and still struggles with how to externalize his emotions. This symbolically shows how Leslie and Jess’s close friendship—symbolized by Prince Terrien—continues to bolster and shelter him even after it has technically been brought to an end.*



## CHAPTER 13

Jess wakes up early Saturday morning to start on his chores—his father has been milking Miss Bessie twice a day since Thursday. After he comes in from the barn, he’s still the only one awake—so he decides to go back down to the creek with **Prince Terrien** and see if he can retrieve any of his paints. Spring has sprung, and on the way down to the creek, Jess marvels at the nature blooming all around him.

*Life without Leslie continues moving forward, even as Jess continues to be in pain. He is healing bit by bit, learning to let go of his anger over Leslie’s death and appreciate the world around him—even without her in it.*



At the creek, Jess finds that a large log has washed up onto the bank. He tests how firm it is, then uses it to cross over to the other side, but he sees no sign of his paints on either bank. Jess knows he isn’t far from Terabithia, but he isn’t sure if it’s even Terabithia anymore without Leslie. **Prince Terrien** swims across the creek and joins Jess on the other side, and together, they walk toward the castle. Jess finds that it looks completely ordinary—there is no sign that someone has died. Jess begins worrying about death, and whether Leslie was scared at the moment of hers.

*Jess worries that the end of his friendship with Leslie also means the end of his tenure as king of Terabithia—but as Prince Terrien swims across the creek, Jess realizes that he can still enter the state of mind that Terabithia represents even without Leslie physically present.*



Jess decides to make a funeral wreath for Leslie, the queen of Terabithia, from a pine bough. As he finishes it, a bird lands nearby—Jess takes it as a sign that he has made a “worthy offering.” Jess walks slowly to the center of the sacred pine grove and lays the wreath on the ground.

*Jess continues to respect the magic of Terabithia and believe in its sacredness, even though he once feared that without Leslie, he’d be unable to sustain the enchantment of the place in his own mind and heart.*



The moment of peace is disrupted when Jess hears someone calling his name and shouting for help—it is May Belle. He runs back to the creek and finds that she’s gotten halfway across the tree bridge but is now too scared to go forward or backward. Jess carefully inches himself out onto the branch and urges May Belle to hold on to him and slide backward. He promises May Belle that he won’t let her fall. He coaches and guides her all the way back to the other side. Once the ordeal is over May Belle apologizes for being scared—but Jess tells her that there’s no shame in feeling fear. Together, they head back to the house to eat some breakfast.

*This passage symbolically externalizes Jess’s own struggle with grief and loss by showing May Belle in a precarious situation. Stranded and alone, unable to move forward or backward, May Belle’s physical state mirrors Jess’s emotional one. In helping her return to safety, Jess symbolically shows that he’s ready to move on and process his grief—even if doing so still feels frightening and unmooring.*



On Monday, when Jess walks into class, he sees that Leslie's desk has already been removed from the classroom. He wonders why everyone is in "such a rush" to get rid of Leslie and her memory. He sits in his desk and puts his head down, trying to ignore the whispers of his classmates as they filter into the room. He hates the things he imagines them saying—and hates the idea that while all of them hated Leslie when she was alive, they might now mourn her death.

After the pledge of allegiance—for which Jess refuses to stand—Mrs. Myers asks Jess to step into the hall. He prepares to get yelled at, but in the hall, he finds that the strict Mrs. Myers has softened. In a quiet voice, she tells him how sorry she is for his loss. Mrs. Myers says that her husband died years ago—when he passed, people wanted her to move on and forget, but she knew she never could. She tells Jess that she wasn't the one to take Leslie's desk out—it was gone when she arrived this morning. Jess wishes he could take back all the cruel jokes he and Leslie ever made about Mrs. Myers behind her back. Through tears, Mrs. Myers suggests they "try to help each other" through the rest of the school year, and Jess agrees.

Jess cannot stop the flood of thoughts he has about Leslie throughout the day. She took him from his cow pasture and "turned him into a king"—but he wonders if now that she's gone, he must move on from Terabithia. It was Leslie, after all, who showed Jess that the real world was just as "terrible and beautiful and [...] fragile" as their imagined one.

On Wednesday, Bill and Judy return from Pennsylvania with a U-Haul, ready to pack up the Perkins place. With Leslie gone, they tell Jess, there's no reason for them to stay—they moved here for her sake so she'd grow up in nature. Bill and Judy give Jess all of Leslie's books and art supplies, and then Jess and Mr. Aaron help the Burkes load up the U-Haul. After the truck is packed, Bill asks Jess if there's anything of theirs left that he wants—Jess asks if he can use of the lumber on the back porch, and they tell him he's welcome to it.

Bill, growing teary, says that he envisioned leaving **Prince Terrien** with Jess—but after some time away from him, he's realized he can't give the dog up. Jess tells Bill that Leslie would want her parents to have the sweet pup.

*Going through such a loss has alienated Jess even further from his peers. Leslie was the only one who truly understood him—and now, in the wake of her loss, he feels he won't be able to find another friendship that gives him all the things that Leslie's did.*



*Mrs. Myers is, in this passage, revealed to be very different from the person that Jess and Leslie (and thus the reader) thought she was. Jess's guilt over having been so cruel to Mrs. Myers mirrors Leslie's guilt over having been cruel to Janice. This shows him, once and for all, that there is often so much more to people than meets the eye. Everyone is going through their own struggle, and Jess has finally learned to accept and respect that truth.*



*Jess doesn't know if Terabithia means what it used to anymore. It was a place of refuge for him and Leslie—but now, with her gone, he feels that it's time for him to move on and try his hand at being the person he was in Terabithia, except in the real world, and all the time.*



*As Jess helps the devastated Bill and Judy ready themselves for a return to their old lives, he comes to realize just how much the two of them and, of course, Leslie, have readied him to embark on a new life himself. In accepting the paints in front of his father, from whom he once hid his passion for art, Jess shows that he is ready to fully inhabit the truth of who he is.*



*Though Jess is no doubt sad to give Prince Terrien up, he knows that Leslie's parents need a reminder of what a good person she was, and how her friendship changed and affected people's lives.*



The next day, after school, Jess begins shuttling a couple of pieces of lumber at a time from the old Perkins place to the creek beyond the house. He lays two long pieces across the creek near where the rope swing used to be, forming a **bridge**, then starts nailing the crosspieces on. May Belle, who has followed Jess down to the creek, asks what he's doing. Jess says he'll tell her when he's finished. May Belle begs to know what he's up to and promises to keep it a secret—she won't even tell Joyce Ann. Jess, however, says that, one day, May Belle should tell Joyce Ann—after May Belle has trained her to be queen.

When Jess finally finishes building the **bridge to Terabithia**, he puts flowers in May Belle's hair and leads her across the structure—he urges her to look around her at all the Terabithians who have gathered to watch the arrival of “the queen they've been waiting for.”

*In this passage, Jess begins building a bridge to Terabithia. The bridge is literal as well as symbolic—it shows that Jess is ready to begin moving on from his grief and transforming it into gratitude for all Leslie has taught him. His love for her—and for Terabithia itself—are secrets no longer; he wants to share with May Belle all he's learned and the ways he's grown because of Leslie's love.*



*In opening Terabithia to May Belle, Jess symbolically shows that he's ready to process his grief and honor Leslie's memory. He's bringing May Belle into Terabithia, and one day might bring others—he hopes to share the magic of a place where everyone is free to be exactly who they are and push the limits of their imaginations.*





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